

# The Small Stuff of the Palmyrenes: The Coins and Tesserae of Palmyra

20–21 June 2019  
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Organised by Rubina Raja



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# 4

## THE SMALL STUFF OF THE PALMYRENES: THE COINS AND TESSERAE OF PALMYRA

### Outline

Palmyra and its archaeology and history have received immense attention over the past decades. During this time, the monumental architecture of the city – mainly dating to the first three centuries CE – as well as the art produced in the city have been at the center of art-historical and archaeological scholarship, and studies of the literary sources and the epigraphy have also been undertaken. However, the local coinage of the city and the so-called banqueting tesseræ remain understudied groups of material from this important site. Therefore, this conference focuses on these two groups of evidence, both of which hold important information about the city's self-representation and its local life over centuries.

The local coinage remains an under-researched object group that, indeed, holds crucial information about local values, as expressed through iconographic representations. It also tells us about the inner workings of the urban networks of Palmyra and their connection to the outside world. The so-called banqueting tesseræ remain, after the funerary sculpture of the city, the richest iconographic source stemming from one specific realm in Palmyra – in this case the religious sphere.

These small, most often terracotta, tokens were used as entrance tickets to religious banquets hosted in the sanctuaries of the city. They display an immensely rich iconographic repertoire and give detailed insight into the religious life of Palmyra, its structure, its development and its networks.

Since the local coinage and the tesseræ have only recently become topics of interest, this conference aims at pushing forward their detailed exploration, placing them within the larger framework of local Palmyrene civic and religious life, considering also the city's outlook to other regions, which may be reflected in the iconographic traditions.



Themes to be explored in the conference papers include the iconography and inscriptions of the local coinage and the tesserae; the reflections of local traditions in the visual language of these groups of material; the influence of traditions from other regions than Palmyra itself, traceable through these objects; the significance of the tesserae for the understanding of the structure of Palmyrene religious life; and the significance of the coinage for the understanding of Palmyra's urban networks and economy.



Tesserae from the collection at Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek showing reclining priest on the obverse and a reclining deity on the reverse (Photo: Rubina Raja).

## Programme

DAY 1: Thursday 20 June 2019	
9:00–9:30	Coffee and registration
9:30–9:45	<b>Welcome and introduction</b> Rubina Raja (Aarhus University)
9:45–10:15	<b>Toward a die study of Palmyra's coinage</b> Nathanael Andrade (University of Binghamton)
10:15–10:45	Discussion
10:45–11:15	<b>The production, circulation and function of the local Palmyrene coinage</b> Nathalia B. Kristensen (Aarhus University)
11:15–11:45	Discussion
11:45–12:15	<b>Beyond Palmyra: The coinage of the Assyrians</b> Kevin Butcher (University of Warwick)
12:15–12:45	Discussion
12:45–13:45	Lunch

13:45–14:15	<b>Civic coins and urban networks: Palmyra and its coinage in a regional perspective</b> Michael Blömer (Aarhus University)
14:15–14:45	Discussion
14:45–15:15	<b>Post-Roman coinage in Palmyra: Two notes on circulation and coin hoarding</b> Emanuele E. Intagliata (Aarhus University)
15:15–15:45	Discussion
15:45–16:15	Break
16:15–16:45	<b>Exploring the religious and social life of Palmyra through the banqueting tesseræ</b> Rubina Raja (Aarhus University)
16:45–17:15	Discussion
17:15–17:45	<b>Tesseræ and prosopography</b> Jean-Baptiste Yon (Laboratoire HiSoMa)
17:45–18:15	Discussion
18:15–18:30	Discussion
19:00	<b>Speakers' dinner</b> Restaurant Tigt, Hyskenstræde 10

## Programme

DAY 2: Friday 21 June 2019	
8:30–9:00	<b>Divine representations on the Palmyrene coins and tesserae</b> Ted Kaizer (Durham University)
9:00–9:30	Discussion
9:30–10:00	<b>Palmyrene tesserae in the context of temple cult: New reflections and approach</b> Aleksandra Kubiak-Schneider (Independent researcher)
10:00–10:30	Discussion
10:30–10:45	Break
10:45–11:15	<b>Caravan trade in Palmyrene tesserae and coins?</b> Eivind H. Seland (University of Bergen)
11:15–11:45	Discussion
11:45–12:15	<b>An unexpected find from the sand: A new tessera from the south-west quarter of Palmyra (2010)</b> Antonino Crisà (University of Warwick)
12:15–12:45	Discussion
12:45–13:00	Final discussion
13:00–14:00	Lunch
14:00	End of conference





Ramp in the Sanctuary of Bel through which sacrificial animals were led to the altars.  
(Photo: Rubina Raja)

## Abstracts

### Toward a die study of Palmyra's coinage

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Conducting a die study of Palmyra's bronze or copper alloy coinage confronts many challenges. The coins' relatively low quality and oftentimes deteriorated condition frequently mar the visibility of the features of individual specimens. We can also presume that the known samples are an infinitesimally small fraction of those that once existed. Moreover, a complete die study would normally include examination of coins from the antiquities market, which poses ethical issues. Many coins have undoubtedly entered the market as looted artefacts in the context of Syria's civil war and the Islamic State's occupation of Palmyra. A quick glance at auction catalogs suggests that an alarmingly high number of specimens have entered the market in recent years.

Despite these challenges, attempting a die study of Palmyra's coinage merits the effort. The goal of this paper is to provide a preliminary die study of known coin specimens from museums, established collections, and prior publications, or at least for certain types. By so doing, it aims to determine whether any new knowledge of Palmyra's coinage can be obtained from such a die study, despite the provisional exclusion of known samples from the antiquities market. It also hopes to shed some further light on the overall output of Palmyra's coins and the historical context of their production.

## **The production, circulation and function of the local Palmyrene coinage**

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Some cities in the Roman East issued a civic coinage to circulate not only within the city itself but also within the surrounding area, thus promoting the city in the region in which it was situated. The numismatic evidence from Palmyra suggests that a production of a local or civic coinage was absent from the city until the middle of the second century CE. Palmyra instead relied on the provincial imperial coinage issued by Roman authorities at Antioch as well as civic coins issued by some of the eastern cities of the Roman Empire. From the middle of the second century CE, however, Palmyra introduced its own local coinage, which circulated in the city alongside the provincial imperial coinage and the civic coinage. What sparked the late production date of this coinage and why? This paper will consider the reasons behind the production of the local Palmyrene coinage and seek to understand how it was circulated and for what purpose it was produced.

## **Beyond Palmyra: The coinage of the Assyrians**

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The bronze coinage of the Parthian and Sasanian empires typically consisted of very small denominations, contrasting with the tradition of bronze coinages in the Roman world, which were commonly larger and heavier. The small bronzes of the Palmyrenes appear to be an adjunct to the monetary systems of the empires across the Euphrates. Yet similar states in Parthian Mesopotamia drew not on the Parthian tradition but consciously imitated Roman coinage, and more specifically the so-called SC bronzes of Antioch. This paper will explore the characteristics of these little-known and poorly-understood coins.

## **Civic coins and urban networks: Palmyra and its coinage in a regional perspective**

Michael Blömer  
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In contrast to other cities of the Near East in the Roman period, Palmyra produced a surprisingly small amount of civic coins. The same applies to contemporary urban centers of Mesopotamia, like Edessa, Hatra, and Spasinou Charax, which had close ties to Palmyra and were economic hubs in their own right. In my paper, I will compare the local coinages of these cities and principalities to look for similarities and differences. Furthermore, the impact and role of the Imperial coins of the Roman and Parthian empires and the civic coinages of the neighboring Roman cities will be considered. This will further the understanding of local, regional, and global economic networks.

## Post-Roman coinage in Palmyra: Two notes on circulation and coin hoarding

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The recent publication on coins brought to light by the Polish team between 1959 and 2001 (*Studia Palmyreńskie* 13) has contributed to change considerably our understanding of coin circulation in Palmyra between Late Antiquity and the early Islamic period.

By combining data from this and other published contributions with those from the Fonds d'Archives Paul Collart, this paper aims to discuss coinage in Palmyra between the second Palmyrene revolt and the end of the Umayyad dominion in Bilad al-Sham (AD 273–750). In so doing, it will use coins to prove that Palmyra remained well connected with major minting centres in Late Antiquity – a conclusion that seem to contrast Procopius' description of the site as an isolated settlement in the 6th century AD – and will raise several observations on the lack of evidence for the 5th century.

This paper will also explore the phenomenon of coin hoarding in late antique and early Islamic Palmyra. It will conclude that the city experienced unrest sometime in the second half of the 7th century AD, but that associating the deposit of coin hoards with specific events, such as inter-tribal fights reported by written sources or tensions between Christians and Muslims, remains difficult with the data at hand.



## **Exploring the religious and social life of Palmyra through the banqueting tesserae**

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The Palmyrene so-called banqueting tesserae have been known for a long time. A first attempt at a corpus was published in 1955 by Ingholt, Seyrig and Starcky, who collected, described and wrote an introduction about all of the, at the time, known pieces from collections around the world and in Palmyra. Their work still provides a good overview of this rich material, which is indeed the material that tells us the most about the diversity of the religious life of Palmyra and the iconography attached to this realm. The tesserae also tell us about matters such as food, drink and dates of banquets, and they offer insight into the iconography of Palmyrene men, both priests and non-priests. However, the tesserae as a whole, and as an object group that carries immense implications for the understanding of Palmyrene religious life, have remained fairly overlooked in research since the publication in 1955, and a new and updated corpus is necessary. It is the intention to compile such a corpus within the framework of the Palmyra Portrait Project.

While we can conclude, from the find spots of many of the tesserae in the sanctuaries in Palmyra, that these must have functioned as entrance tickets to banquets held in the sanctuaries of the cities, it still remains unclear which dynamics were the driving forces behind the configuration of the iconography of the tesserae. This paper will explore some lines of enquiries into how we might be able to move on the interpretation and understanding of these tiny objects as signifiers of social and religious interaction in Palmyrene society.

## **Tesseras and prosopography**

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Tesseras have often been used to reconstruct the life and careers of religious officials of Palmyra, especially for the more prominent of them. This paper will come back once again on the part played by tesseras and their epigraphy for what we know or believe we know of the society of the city. It will study the specific contribution of these small objects, compared to more monumental witnesses of the self-representation of the civic elite.

## **Divine representations on the Palmyrene coins and tesserae**

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This paper will ask questions about the way in which inhabitants of the divine world of Tadmor-Palmyra find themselves depicted both on the coinage produced by the city itself and on the small tokens commonly thought to have served as entrance tickets to religious gatherings. The coins and tesserae share similarities: they are both tiny and must have presented challenges to the artists who were responsible for the divine representations. They are also different from each other: The coins formed a public façade of civic religion, whereas the imagery on the tesserae was aimed at smaller religious subgroups within the local society.

## **Palmyrene tesseræ in the context of temple cult: New reflections and approach**

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The Palmyrene tesseræ are unique objects of this type when we take a look on the Partho-Roman Near East. Nevertheless, they never became an object of profound study. They are considered to be the entrance tickets for ritual banquets performed in honor of various gods, which is deduced from the scenes depicted on these small objects, showing frequently a priest lying on the banquet bed. The iconography is limited to the representation of the gods, their attributes, the temples, the priests or cultic agents and to the floral motifs. The short inscriptions deliver information such as: personal names, offices, measurements of wine and oil, sometimes dates, names of the gods and puzzling invocations. Because of a lack of direct analogies to the Palmyrene tesseræ, it is difficult to be sure about their function in the religious life of the Palmyrenes. Therefore, combining epigraphy and iconography, this paper focuses on the tesseræ in the context of the temple cult, highlighting issues such as: temple administration (taking as a model the administration of Mesopotamian temples in the Hellenistic and Post-Hellenistic times) and divinities.

## **Caravan trade in Palmyrene tesserae and coins?**

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While there is agreement that long-distance trade was an important basis for Palmyrene wealth and power, commercial activities are conspicuously absent from the iconographic record including the funerary reliefs. This might be explained by the low status generally associated with commerce in the ancient world; nevertheless, we would expect that traces of the activity would be visible in the more modest medium of tesserae. These were probably partly produced by associations, some of them formed by merchants and craftsmen. Coins were issued by the city, and searching for evidence of trade in these civic self-representations is also worthwhile. In this paper, I survey the corpora of tesserae and coins from Palmyra, arguing that caravan trade is indeed evident in the latter, but not in the former group of evidence.

## **An unexpected find from the sand: A new tessera from the south-west quarter of Palmyra (2010)**

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Between 2007 and 2010 the University of Milan and the General Directorate of Antiquities and Museum in Damascus have performed archaeological excavations in the south-west quarter of the ancient Palmyra. These explorations, carried out near the ancient walls of the site, shed new light on substantial structures, which formed the so-called “Peristyle Building”, a supposed Roman house –also used as manufacturing area – roughly occupied between 2nd and 8th century AD. A very fortunate, unexpected discovery took place in November 2010, when some local workers found a small banqueting tessera in room H of the “Peristyle Building”.

The main scope of this paper is to present the newly found tessera and its discovery. Even if the artefact has been already reported in the well-known *Recueil des tessères de Palmyre* (1955), it certainly represents a rare finding of such objects in well-documented explorations, in which I was personally involved. First, I fully illustrate the archaeological context, explaining the relationship between the tessera and other finds, discovered in the same stratigraphical unit. Second, I accurately assess iconographic elements of the token, which shows a bare male head, a bucranium and a standing priest and his assistant, probably acting in food distribution and sacred rituals.

In conclusion, such data and documented archaeological context reveal not only how banqueting tesserae played a significant role in Palmyrene civic and religious daily-life, but also shed new light on the production, use and final disposal of these essential artefacts.





Relief on altar in the Sanctuary of Nabu showing a sacrificial scene with Palmyrene priests. (Photo: Rubina Raja).



Tessera from the collection at Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek depicting busts of deities on the obverse and a camel with a saddle on the reverse (Photo: Rubina Raja).



## Organiser



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## Website and travel reimbursement (speakers only)

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

To claim back conference-related travel expenses, please download the travel reimbursement form from the conference website (cf. section "Practical information for speakers").

1. Fill out the form (disregard the bottom part). Danish participants should fill in their CPR no., and the money will be disposed in their NemKonto.
2. Forward the Excel file (no need to sign) and scanned copies of your receipts to Christina Levisen: [levisen@cas.au.dk](mailto:levisen@cas.au.dk).

Please note that it can take a couple of weeks for Aarhus University's Finance Dept. to process your claim, especially when international transfers are involved.

## GDPR

Note: We will take photographs during the conference, which we store and use for e.g. reporting purposes. If you do not want us to use photos in which you are depicted, please contact Christina Levisen: [levisen@cas.au.dk](mailto:levisen@cas.au.dk).





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**Front cover:** Tessera from the collection at Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek depicting standing camel with saddle (Photo: Rubina Raja).

**Back cover:** View of entrance to the Temple of Bel in Palmyra (Photo: Rubina Raja).

All objects from the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek are reproduced courtesy of the museum.

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