

*This article is dedicated to Khaled al-As'ad and all other Syrians  
who lost their lives and loved ones while protecting the country's cultural heritage.*

## **Death and burial in early *Palmyra*. Reflections on urbanization, imperialism, and the creation of memorial landscapes**

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Although its demise, in Roman times and in recent years, has been extensively publicized, we know surprisingly little about the earlier history of the desert city of *Palmyra*. Textual records from the second millennium BC refer to Tadmor / *Palmyra*, when it was a stop for people and traders crossing the desert. Then, after a long gap, the site emerges in the historical record early in the first millennium AD as a thriving desert port, an important way station for trade with the Persian Gulf. The archaeological and epigraphic record of this era attests to the city's enormous spending power and diverse cultural affiliations. *Palmyra*'s association with one of the main imperial powers of the time, Rome, is well known, and its main life artery, the caravan trade, crossed largely through territory under control of another empire, *Parthia*. Yet how this situation came about, *Palmyra*'s urbanization, grip on long-distance trade, and imperial entanglement remains shrouded in mystery.

The centuries leading up to the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD are poorly understood, the result of both the lack of material and epigraphic evidence pre-dating the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, and confusing statements in the literary sources. Appian's comments, for instance, about Marcus Antonius' intension to plunder the riches of *Palmyra* in 41/40 BC suggest that the site was already a wealthy city before the extension of Roman control. Yet Edwell argues that this story was anachronistic<sup>1</sup>. Pliny the Elder states that *Palmyra* maintained political independence from *Parthia* and Rome; an issue much debated in the scholarship<sup>2</sup>. The lack of resolution for the early period (4<sup>th</sup>/3<sup>rd</sup> – 1<sup>st</sup> century BC) is dealt with in different ways. At one end of the spectrum stand scholars who assume a steady urbanization of the site starting in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC, when the region came under control of Hellenistic, Seleucid kings<sup>3</sup>. Direct evidence supporting this scenario is absent; the matter appears to be one of transposing or backdating what is known about post-1<sup>st</sup> century BC *Palmyra*. At the other end of the spectrum, and more common, one finds accounts where *Palmyra* bursts onto the stage in the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, a time when it already possessed an urban center, and its inhabitants are on record as organizers of long-distance trade and maintaining an army<sup>4</sup>. Such accounts do not dwell on the early settlement, or how this situation came about. Even the origins of *Palmyra*'s main source of income and power, long-distance trade, remain unclear. The site was not a logical stop on the long-distance trade routes traversing the Near East, which, as recent scholarship has pointed out, would have followed the northerly route along the Euphrates<sup>5</sup>.

This article reevaluates a category of evidence that, although small and fragmented, may in fact hold clues about early *Palmyra*. Several tombs with well-preserved inventories have been found in the oasis, representing some of the oldest remains (4<sup>th</sup>/3<sup>rd</sup> century BC – 1<sup>st</sup> century AD). They are generally overlooked in the scholarship on early *Palmyra*, and indeed their shape and decoration are nowhere near as extensive or elaborate as later tombs at the site. Yet, as the material reflections of the ritual deposition of the dead, they inform us not only about the spiritual life, but also about social groups within the community and their priorities. They offer glimpses into the trade-connections and cultural leaning of its occupants. Tracing the placement of the tombs within the landscape of the Palmyrene oasis allows us to

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1 Appian, BC 5.1.9; EDWELL 2008, 35. – The author wishes to thank the editors for the invitation, Ch. Williamson for her valuable comments, and E. Bolhuis for the illustrations.

2 Plin. Nat. 5.21. According to BOWERSOCK 1994, 88, Pliny was talking about an earlier (Augustan) period.

3 E.g. FELLMANN 1970, 136; GRAINGER 1990, 182; SARTRE-FAURIAT 2016; SCHMIDT-COLINET/AL-AS'AD 2000, 62 f.; SCHMIDT-COLINET/AL-AS'AD 2013, 75; see also WILL 1983, 76.

4 E.g. EDWELL 2008; GAWLIKOWSKI 2003; SARTRE 2005; SMITH 2013; YON 2002; YOUNG 2001.

5 SELAND 2015, 106 f.; YOUNG 2001, 138.

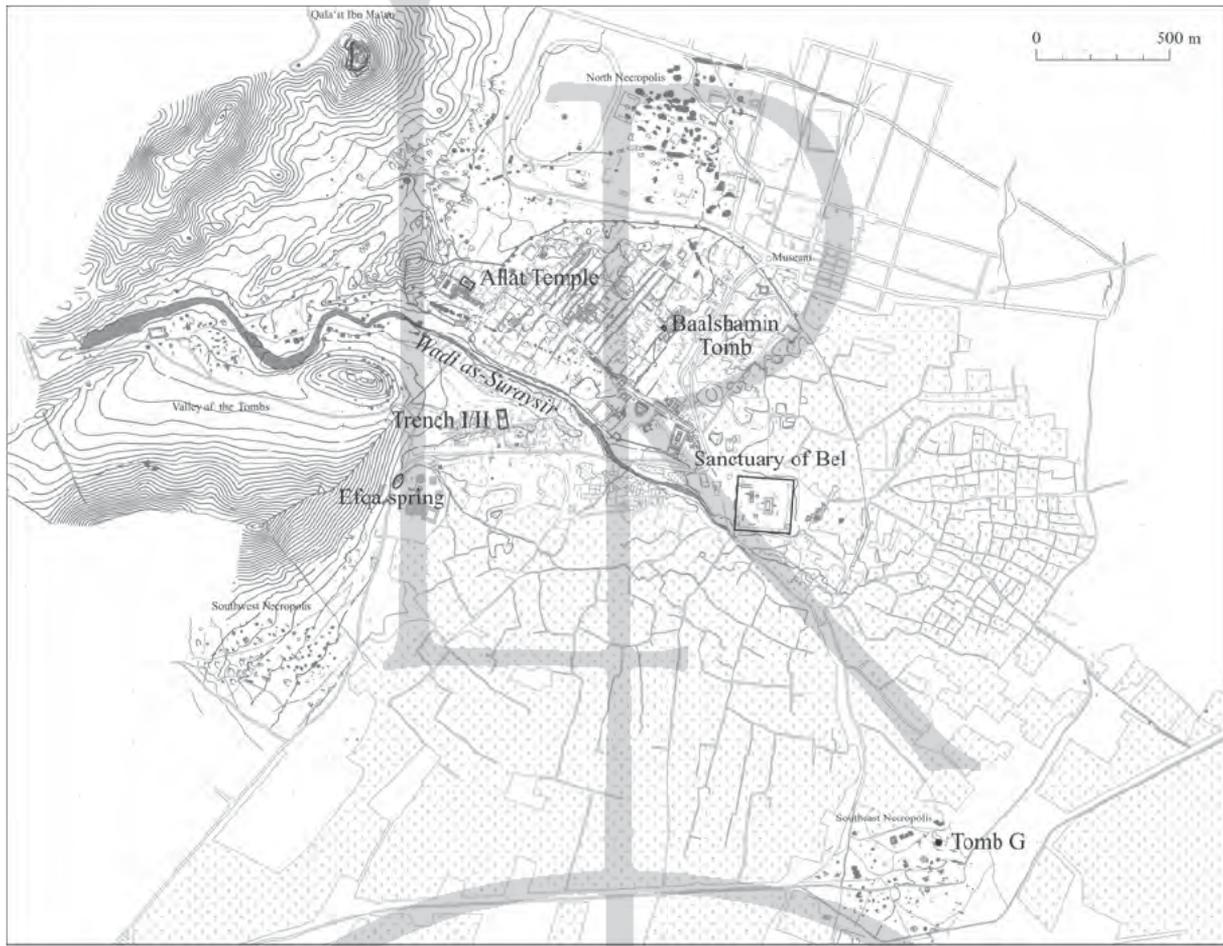


Fig. 1. Earliest phase of Palmyra (drawn by Groningen Institute of Archaeology, after SCHNÄDELBACH 2010).

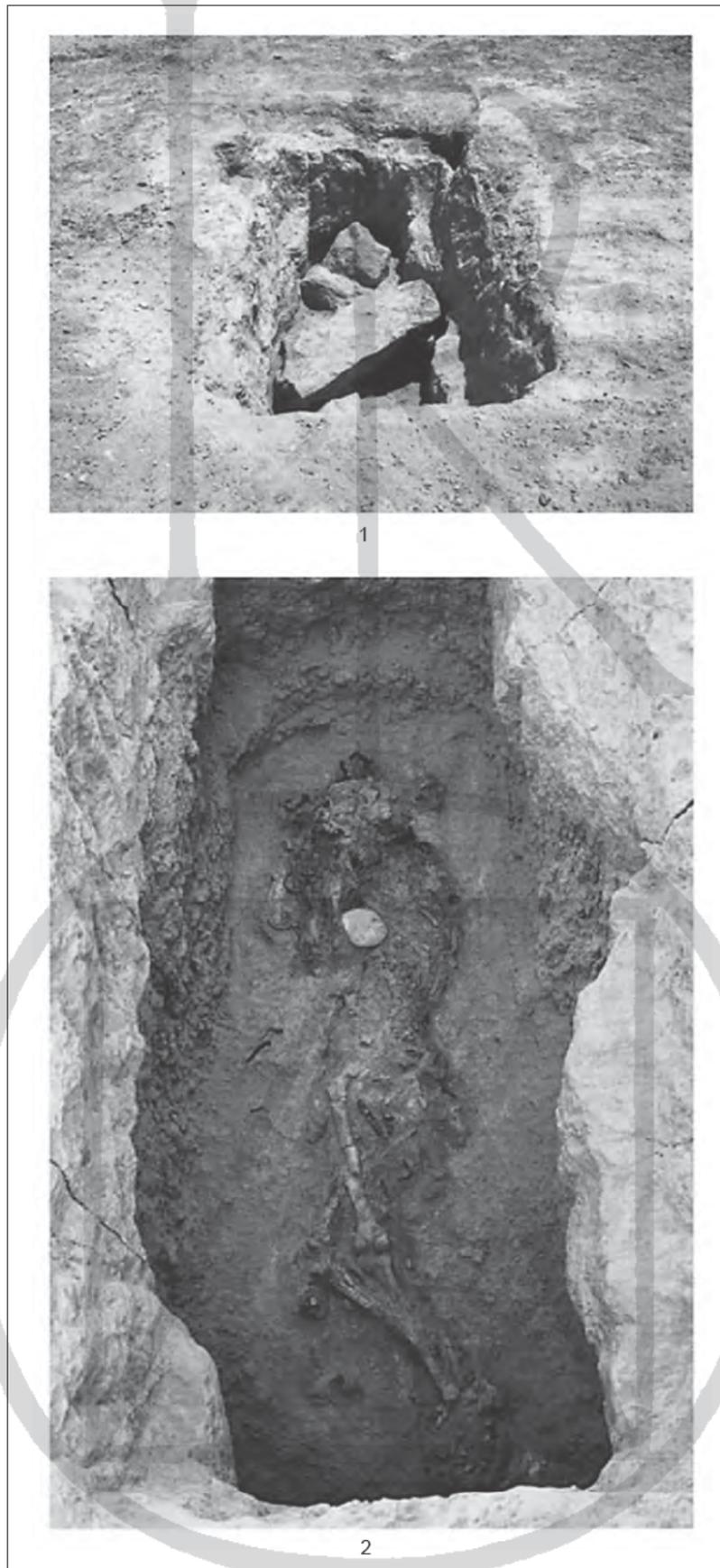
look more closely at the development of the inhabited space. This article takes a contextual approach, by situating the tombs and their contents in the spatial setting of the Palmyrene landscape, as well as the social and political background of the time. I address the ritual statements that were made through building and burying. The structure of the article follows the two phases in which the funerary remains can be grouped. The first spans between the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> century BC, and concentrates on the stages of development of the site and background of the inhabitants. The second phase started in the late 1<sup>st</sup> century BC, when a radical new concept of funerary architecture entered the Palmyrene cemetery, creating a new memorial landscape. This phase, and this article, ends in the later 1<sup>st</sup> century AD when monumentalization of funerary architecture had become the norm, and *Palmyra* entered the well documented era of trade, empire, and urbanization.

### *Palmyra's beginnings (3<sup>rd</sup> century – 1<sup>st</sup> century BC)*

The site of *Palmyra*/Tadmūr developed around an oasis of underwater springs in the Central Syrian Desert. It is divided into two parts by the Wadi as-Suraysir, which flows from the hilly western region into a flatter area, towards a centrally placed tell (fig. 1). In a later phase, the Sanctuary of Bel occupied this tell. Orchards extended south, east, and northeast of the tell, and were irrigated by the springs. Nomadic activity in the region can be dated back millennia, and the well-watered site of *Palmyra* was probably of central importance to these mobile groups.

Texts from the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium also describe their role as guides for caravans crossing the desert<sup>6</sup>. Based on epigraphic evidence dating to the late 1<sup>st</sup> century BC onwards, scholars generally assume that the ancient town of *Palmyra* was the result of sedentarization of part of this population.

6 HESSE 2016.



*Fig. 2. Palmyra. Two views of Tomb G (after SAITO 2005, figs. 42–43).*

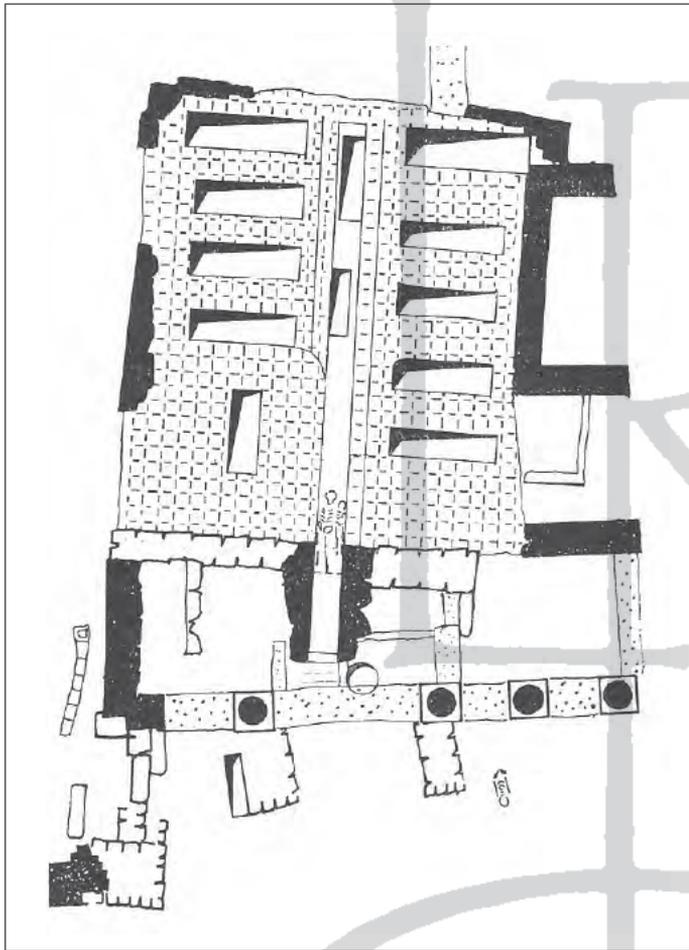


Fig. 3. Palmyra. Plan of the Baalshamin Tomb with later architecture (black-filled) (reproduced from FELLMANN 1970, fig. 35).

Two tombs have been discovered at *Palmyra* dating before the late 1<sup>st</sup> century BC. This funerary evidence is not extensive but adds valuable information about the early development of the site. The oldest (Tomb G) was found in the area of the later Southeast Necropolis, about 1.5 km from the tell (fig. 1). This simple pit-grave (2.5 x 1.5 x 1.5 m) was dug into a small outcrop. It held a wooden sarcophagus with the skeletal remains of a middle-aged man still wearing a gold and carnelian ring, two bracelets (gold and bronze), and necklaces made of agate and gold beads and pendants. Pieces of textile and leather belonged to the garments (fig. 2). Based on C-14 dating of the skeleton, the burial took place between 380 and 160 BC<sup>7</sup>.

The second tomb was of a different type. Found more than 2 km northwest of Tomb G, it was located in the *temenos* of the later Baalshamin Sanctuary (fig. 1), which provided its name. The Baalshamin Tomb was dug in a small natural hill and may have been partly above ground, although this remains unclear. It is built in mudbrick and follows a rectangular plan (22 x 11 m) consisting of a central corridor with stacked niches (*loculi*) on either side, and pit-graves in the floor (fig. 3). The communal tomb held at least 61 individuals, many of whom were accompanied by a small number of grave gifts (1–6 items). These include earrings, bracelets, rings, pins, necklaces, belts, pottery and alabaster vessels, and, less frequently, coins, lamps, and mirrors (fig. 4). The ceramic assemblage contained materials imported from the coastal Levant and from *Mesopotamia*, and other finds (alabaster, jewelry) illustrate similar connections to the regions east and west of *Palmyra*<sup>8</sup>.

Based on the grave goods, R. Fellmann placed the construction of the tomb between 175 and 150 BC. The date of abandonment is less clear. The dedication of the Baalshamin Temple in AD 60 provides a *terminus ante quem* since the tomb was no longer accessible at this time. Construction of the temple, however, may have started around AD 20. An inscription added to the tomb in AD 11 was interpreted by the excavator as an epitaph, but others have considered it the commemoration of the purification

7 SAITO 1995, 34; SAITO 2005, 16–19; 159–162.

8 FELLMANN 1970.

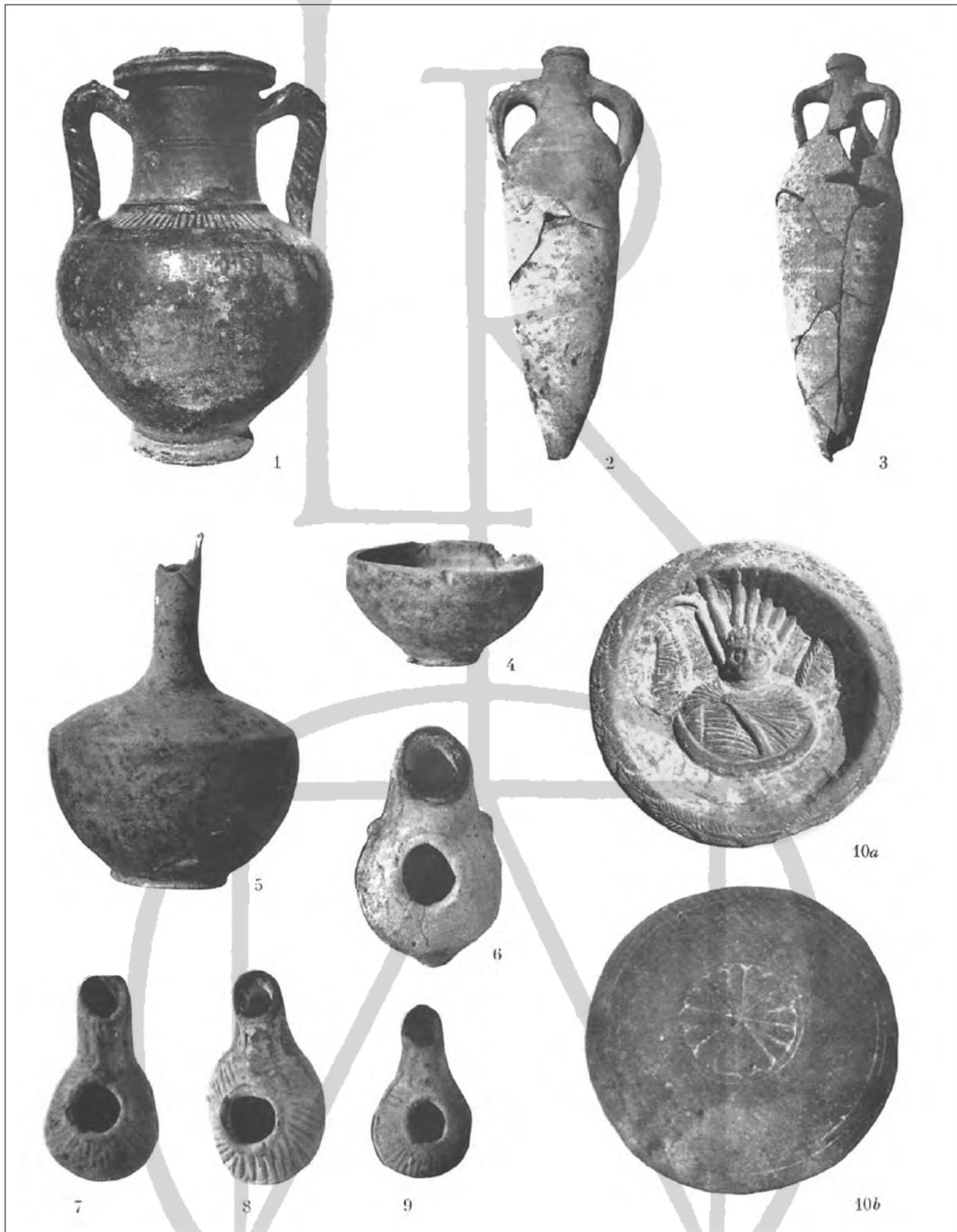


Fig. 4. *Palmyra*. Finds from *loculus 1* in *Baalshamin Tomb* (reproduced from FELLMAN 1970, pl. 13).

and ritual closing of the tomb<sup>9</sup>. The latter interpretation is probably accurate, since the text differed from contemporary funerary inscriptions, e.g., in the Tomb of 'Atenatan (9 BC) or Kitot (AD 40)<sup>10</sup>. A

<sup>9</sup> FELLMANN 1970, 112–114; KAIZER 2010, 24; TEIXIDOR 1979, 22 f.

<sup>10</sup> GAWLIKOWSKI 1970, 184 f.; for the Palmyrene text from the *Baalshamin Tomb*, see TEIXIDOR 1979, 22 f. A second inscription on the same *loculus* perhaps has a date of AD 57/58 according to FELLMANN (1970, 115 f.), but others doubt this date (GAWLIKOWSKI 1974, 238).

1<sup>st</sup> century AD oil lamp constituted the latest dateable find from the Baalshamin Tomb, but it may have originated from an intrusive grave. The next group of finds dated to the second half of the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC. Based on stratigraphic, epigraphic, and material evidence, the tomb was probably abandoned between 50 BC and AD 11.

Tomb G and the Baalshamin Tomb have little in common and were probably not contemporary. They share the elevated placement and a remarkable inventory, revealing, among other things, an emphasis on the adornment of the body. The imported goods show connections with regions east and west of *Palmyra*. There are no direct cultural models for the Baalshamin Tomb type. Nearby contemporary cemeteries at Jebel Khalid and Tell Sheikh Hamad contained simple pit- and cist-graves, as well as jarburials<sup>11</sup>. Outside the walls of *Dura-Europos*, more elaborate rock-cut chamber tombs or hypogea were dug, but none followed the plan of the Baalshamin Tomb<sup>12</sup>. The grave goods from the Palmyrene tombs, on the other hand, display similarities with inventories of other cemeteries, both in style and function, including the bodily adornment. The vessels were perhaps related to ritual activities such as libation and banquets<sup>13</sup>.

The immediate surroundings of the two tombs in *Palmyra* yielded no other funerary materials or indications for the presence of a cemetery, although it is uncertain to what degree this was investigated. At this point the tombs represent isolated discoveries, found more than 2 km from each other. When combined with other – non-funerary – evidence, however, this dispersal may in fact hold a key towards understanding the early development of the site.

### *The settlement(s)*

Some of the oldest remains were discovered by Kh. al-As'ad and A. Schmidt-Colinet in the region south of Wadi as-Suraysir<sup>14</sup>. Geophysical research revealed a densely inhabited quarter. Two trenches were excavated, one of which yielded mudbrick walls of the last quarter of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC (Trench I, fig. 1). In the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC a well, a mudbrick pavement, and a terracotta pipeline were added. The first stone constructions in this trench date to the Augustan period. In the nearby second sounding (Trench II), a mudbrick building was erected in the mid or second half of the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC, with another stone extension in the period of Augustus. The rest of the architecture found in the geophysical survey has not been investigated or dated thus far. As with the Baalshamin Tomb, finds from the two trenches illustrate that the people of *Palmyra* were connected to trade. The assemblage included imports and local fabrications with a clear eastern Mediterranean influence. Starting around 150 BC, glazed wares are testament to links with Parthian *Mesopotamia*<sup>15</sup>.

Other pre-Roman remains stemmed from the area of the Sanctuary of Bel on the tell. In addition to Bronze Age remains, soundings in the temple court have yielded 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC layers with a mudbrick wall<sup>16</sup>. A temple was built at this location early in the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD at the latest. Further west, the earliest epigraphic evidence of the Allat Temple dated to AD 4 or 6. Based on a reconstruction of a family tree, F. Millar suggests that the foundation of the first Allat Temple went back to the earlier 1<sup>st</sup> century BC<sup>17</sup>. The main water source of *Palmyra*, the Efqa Spring, was exploited for irrigation before the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD<sup>18</sup>.

Though highly fragmented, the earliest traces of human activity in *Palmyra* demonstrate two aspects of the initial occupation. First, the mudbrick architecture received upgrades with stone and, at times, monumental additions in the late 1<sup>st</sup> century BC or slightly after. This period thus marks a new phase of construction, to which I will return. Second, the archaeological remains dating as far back as the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC were found at great distances from each other. The tell was ca. 1.3 km from the Allat Temple and from the Efqa Spring, and ca. 1 km from Trench I (fig. 1). This prompts one to wonder whether the region between these findspots was settled as well, thus implying the presence of a large settlement. Yet no reports of traces of an early settlement exist, despite the fact that *Palmyra* has been investigated since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Schmidt-Colinet noted that deep trenches in the region north of Wadi as-

11 JACKSON / LITTLETON 2002; LITTLETON / FROHLICH 2002; NOVÁK 2000.

12 TOLL 1946; DE JONG 2017, 242 f.

13 DE JONG 2017, 146–174.

14 SCHMIDT-COLINET / AL-AS'AD 2013.

15 LAUBENHEIMER / RÖMER-STREHL 2013; RÖMER-STREHL 2013, 20.

16 AL-MAQDISSI 2000; BOUNNI / AL-MAQDISSI 2001, 21 f.

17 MILLAR 1993, 320; see also FILARSKA 1966.

18 HAMMAD 2010, 10.

Suraysir failed to yield pre-1<sup>st</sup> century AD materials<sup>19</sup>. There is as yet no reason to assume that the large area between the tell, the Efqa Spring, and the Allat Temple was inhabited. Rather, the site has yielded a puzzling scatter of remains including funerary materials.

In this respect, there are two attractive theses proposed about the development of *Palmyra*. M. Sommer argued that *Palmyra* originally consisted of several nuclei, each centered on a sanctuary and connected to a tribal group<sup>20</sup>. He appears to portray a later situation, but the evidence described above could indicate that such nuclei already existed before the mid-1<sup>st</sup> century BC. In his book on the urban transformation of *Palmyra*, M. Hammad situates the initial settlement on the tell. He argues that its early inhabitants exploited the Efqa Spring for irrigation purposes. The distance between the settlement and the spring is explained by the natural landscape and because the water source was also made available for nomadic visitors<sup>21</sup>. Both Hammad and Sommer, therefore, link the nomadic background of (part of) the population to the outlook of the settlement. Hammad, furthermore, postulates the creation of a second nucleus on the hill of the Baalshamin Tomb around the mid-2<sup>nd</sup> century BC. This area was watered by a qanat that brought water from a spring located by the later Allat Temple (fig. 1). According to Hammad, *Palmyra* had a bipolar character, with two settlements, each on a hill and connected to its own water source providing irrigation water for two distinct fields under cultivation. Whereas the archaeological evidence in Hammad's bipolar thesis is limited, the idea of multiple nuclei would fit the burial evidence. In other words, the site was not a single settlement with an extensive necropolis, but rather consisted of several pockets of human activity of various kinds, domestic, agricultural, religious, and funerary, spread out over an area of more than 300 ha. What these pockets looked like is difficult to determine. They may represent several villages, each with its own burial ground, farmland, and water sources. Alternatively, we are dealing with a more dispersed distribution of houses, tombs, fields, channels, and sanctuaries over a large area, without formal boundaries.

### *Urban models*

*Palmyra* did not suddenly burst onto the stage in the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD. Some of the main structures of the later city, such as the sanctuaries and agricultural development, were already in place. By the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC, human activity is attested in the area of Trench I, the tell, Baalshamin Tomb, two springs, and perhaps the Southeast Necropolis (fig. 1). A century later, evidence for religious activity stems from the Allat and Bel precincts. Investments in irrigation indicate that the site was more than a watering hole for visiting pastoralists. The area was settled and farmed on a more permanent basis. Its resident community was well connected and imported goods from various eastern Mediterranean sites, as well as the Parthian world.

The amorphous nature of the site informs us that we should avoid viewing *Palmyra* through the lens of traditional Hellenistic urbanism and its typically gridded and walled nucleated centers with civic, palatial, and defensive architecture, a central plaza (*agora*), and monumental religious architecture<sup>22</sup>. Although this model is implicit in many studies of Palmyrene urbanization<sup>23</sup>, it is clearly not the correct one for early *Palmyra*. The more interesting question is what model, if any, Palmyrenes had in mind. If the original inhabitants came from the nomadic tribes traversing the desert, what would typify their first settlement? Hammad postulates that the oasis continued to be shared with nomadic pastoralists<sup>24</sup>. The multi-polar or dispersed model of habitation and the use of the site may very well be the result of this interaction and the increased sedentarization of mobile populations.

### *Seleucid and Parthian imperialism*

By the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC, central Syria was the realm of Seleucid power and Parthian expansionism. As noted in the introduction, the exact border between the two empires in the desert is difficult to determine. The Palmyrene evidence is not much help as there are no indications for direct imperial control. On the Seleucid side, such indications come in the form of colonization, ruler-cult, royal investments, militarization, and the architecture of power<sup>25</sup>. On the Parthian side, we can consider the administrative

19 SCHMIDT-COLINET 2003, 19.

20 SOMMER 2005.

21 HAMMAD 2010.

22 Cf. BILLOWS 2005; OWENS 1991.

23 Cf. GAWLIKOWSKI 1974; GAWLIKOWSKI 2003; SARTRE 2005.

24 HAMMAD 2010, 12.

25 Cf. KOSMIN 2014; CLINE / GRAHAM 2011.

restructuring and references to Parthian kings<sup>26</sup>. Direct evidence for these phenomena is absent in the material and epigraphic record from *Palmyra*. Also, the cultural leanings of its inhabitants do not point to affiliation with one empire or the other. No parallels exist for the Baalshamin Tomb, whose contents reflect various trade orientations. The notable increase in Parthian ceramics after 150 BC is linked to the arrival of a new player in the region, but can hardly be interpreted as imperial control. Irrigation technology, mudbrick architecture, tomb-types, and religious expressions may well reflect primarily local or steppe (Jezirah) connections.

The same is true regarding *Palmyra's* trade-network. By the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC, its inhabitants were connected to wider markets of the East Mediterranean and Parthian *Mesopotamia*. The material is too limited to assess the type and intensity of this involvement, and whether Palmyrene trade connections were more intensive than in other parts of Syria and *Mesopotamia*. Scholars have connected the growth of the site and the investments in making the oasis a permanent place of residence to the disruption of the northerly trade route due to hostilities between the Seleucid and Parthian empires<sup>27</sup>. Yet we lack any evidence for Palmyrene involvement in the organization of this trade. Furthermore, imperial clashes between Parthians and Romans, later on in *Palmyra's* history hardly impacted trade crossing the territories of both empires.

The evidence for imperial interactions in *Palmyra* is ephemeral at best. This does not prove an absence of imperial interference, but rather its invisibility. The Palmyrene oasis fared well in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC, and it attracted imported luxuries. Although this may well be connected to Seleucid and Parthian geopolitics, the site was never center stage to imperial manipulation. The contrast with the next phase, when Rome enters the picture, could not be sharper.

## The monumentalization of funerary architecture

Starting in the second half of the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC, tall stone towers were erected in the arid hills west of the oasis, an area known as the Valley of the Tombs or West Cemetery. These tombs consisted of a stepped base (average 6 x 6 m) and a square tower reaching several meters in height. Burial took place in longitudinal *loculi* that were made in the base of the tower and were accessible from the exterior. Inside, a winding staircase led to a – presumably flat – roof. At least 16 tower tombs were built between ca. 50 and 1 BC (fig. 5)<sup>28</sup>. All except three were erected on hilltops on either side of the wadi (fig. 6). An inscription in Palmyrene Aramaic decorated the northern façade of one of the later tower tombs. It states that 'Atenatan built the tomb for his sons in November 9 BC. This section investigates this phase of building activity and enhancement of funerary architecture. Many scholars have pointed to the early monumentalization of the sanctuaries of *Palmyra*, but the fact that this also happened with funerary architecture at the same time, or even earlier, is largely overlooked.

The towers covered a triangular area spanning several hectares. Although designated as funerary space, the Valley of the Tombs can hardly be considered a bounded necropolis in this period. The towers were scattered over a wide area and irregularly spaced. Those closest together stood within 35 m of each other. Others extended almost 450 m from one another. The inhabitants of *Palmyra* had marked a new area for burial, but maintained a pattern of dispersal when placing the tombs. The towers were entirely constructed above ground; they were tall and their locations on natural elevations in the landscape made them more prominent (fig. 7). Thus visibility was emphasized, although it is not clear who the intended audience was. Only a few tower tombs were aligned with the natural entrance to *Palmyra* via the wadi bed. One would have to wander far through the hills to reach the others, and the furthest stood more than half a kilometer away from the wadi. Nevertheless, the tower tombs were conspicuous, and due to their size, durable building material and visibility, they can be considered monumental. They represent a break with earlier traditions in tomb building, regarding architectural type, energy expenditure, as well as placement.

The new burial ground was far from the older tombs and from the inhabited and cultivated areas of the oasis. Most findspots discussed in the previous section continued to be used in the second half of the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC (fig. 1). The earliest dated Palmyrene inscription (44/43 BC) referred to the erection of a statue by priests of Bel, which Millar links to the existence of a Bel Temple at the site, presumably placed on the tell<sup>29</sup>. The earliest epigraphic evidence of the Allat Temple and perhaps also the Nabu

26 DE JONG/PALERMO 2018; MILLAR 1998.

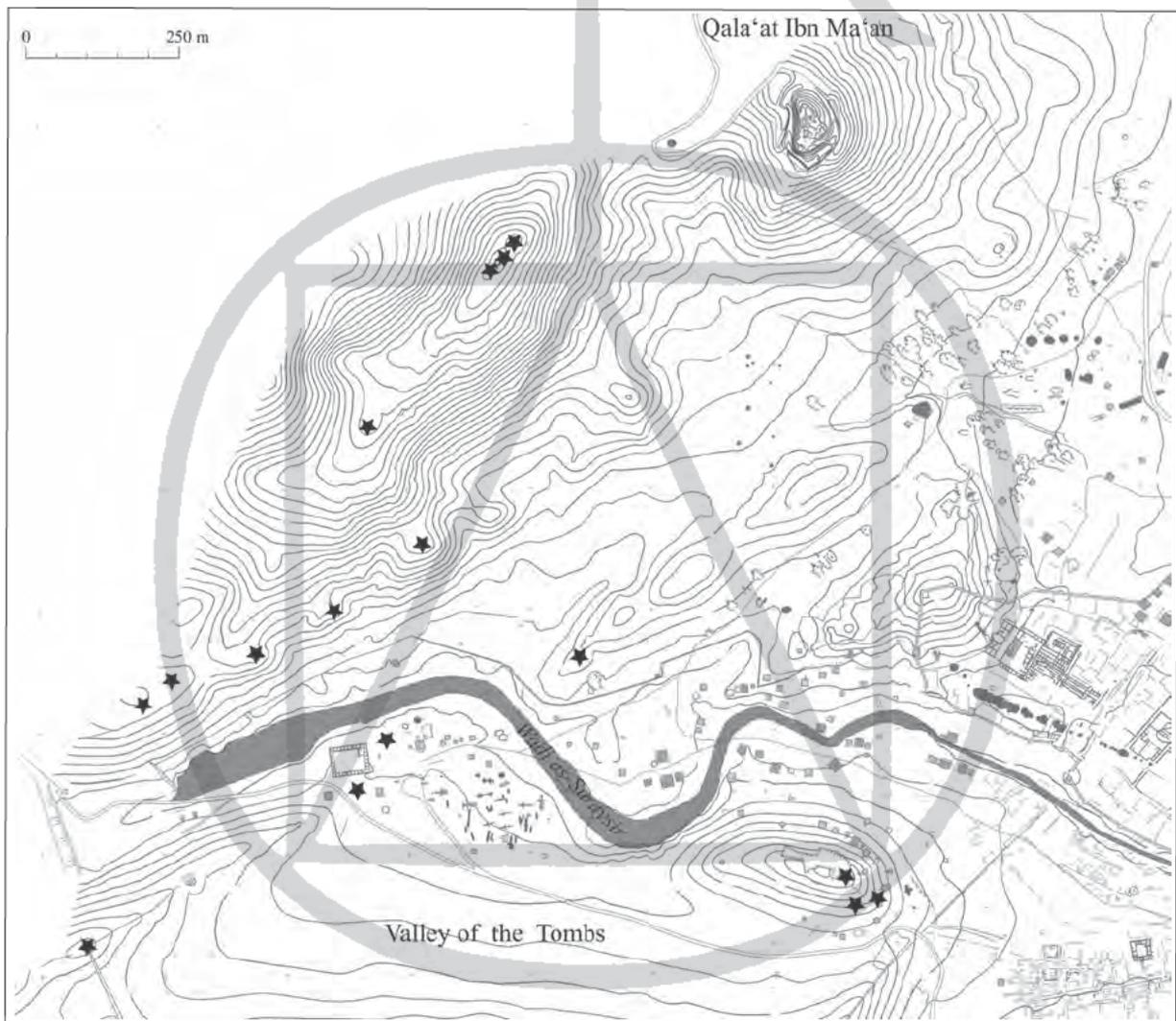
27 HAMMAD 2010, 16; SELAND 2015, 107.

28 HENNING 2013; DE JONG 2017, 288 f.

29 MILLAR 1993, 320.



*Fig. 5. Palmyra. Tower tomb 24  
(ca. 50 and 1 BC)  
(after HENNING 2013, pl. 5a).*



*Fig. 6. Palmyra. Earliest phase of the West Cemetery (drawn by Groningen Institute of Archaeology, after SCHNÄDELBACH 2010).*



*Fig. 7. Palmyra. Tower tombs in the West Cemetery. The earliest towers were placed on top of small hills and natural outcrops (photo author).*

Temple date from the late 1<sup>st</sup> century BC<sup>30</sup>. Non-religious evidence comes from Trench II, where a large courtyard building arose<sup>31</sup>. The mid-1<sup>st</sup> century BC settlement perhaps did not appear very different from that of a century earlier, with dispersed activity over a large area and little indication for nucleation. It was the inclusion of the western hillside, now dotted with monumental tower tombs, that was new. The area of human activity incorporated a new space, which was reserved for burial. Since all of the tower tombs are located here, it is likely that it was an area of high symbolic significance. It marks the reconceptualization of the landscape of the oasis.

The introduction of sculpture and epigraphy, combined with increased activity at *Palmyra's* religious sites, indicates changes in Palmyrene society. This was accompanied or preceded by a phase of monumentalizing funerary architecture. It is important to note that this occurred fairly rapidly. Sudden monumentality is sometimes interpreted in scholarship on mortuary archaeology as an indicator for stress and pressure on existing social structure<sup>32</sup>. Pronounced changes in power-structure or social make-up resulted in the investment of resources by (some of) the community in novel ways. This scenario could apply to *Palmyra* in the second half of the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC, although external evidence is lacking. In other words, we run the risk of circular reasoning if we interpret sudden monumentality as a sign of social stress and the tower tombs are our only evidence. However, when the chronological net is cast a bit wider, several indications for changes in Palmyrene society begin to emerge.

30 BOUNNI 2005, 17.

31 ERTEL/PLOYER 2013.

32 Cf. BARRETT 1996; PARKER PEARSON 2008 (1999) 40.