

PALMYRA - A LITTLE KNOWN DESERT KINGDOM

by Thomas Kummert
www.ancient-cultures.info



In the Syrian desert 200km away from the nearest settlement, halfway between Damascus and the Euphrates lies isolated the ancient oasis of Palmyra. In antiquity called by its Arab name Tadmor, which was later used again for the present day town.

2,000 years ago Tadmor or Palmyra was one of the most glorious cities and thriving trading centers in the Middle East.

Its enormous wealth resulted from Palmyra's position at the end of the famous Silk Road and allowed the construction of a huge city with long colonnaded streets and immense representative buildings including various impressive temples.

In addition Palmyra became later an important bastion of the Roman Empire's eastern border and an important ally against their eastern enemies, such as the powerful and combative Parthians in Persia.



Importance of Palmyra

To substantiate these statements about the grandeur of Palmyra, here are some of the surprising facts. The ruins of Palmyra represent the biggest open air archeological site in the Middle East and stretch over more than 10 square kilometers, although only 30% of it can be seen today.

The modern city of Tadmor has certainly been built on some of the old invisible destroyed quarters of the ancient city. The oasis of Palmyra could flourish through abundant water supply from the two Afqa springs, which was also used for therapeutic purposes treating respiratory tract, pulmonic tracheas, arthritis & rheumatism.

The demise of Petra and the Nabataean kingdom falling into Roman hands around 100AD certainly accelerated the rise of Palmyra and its taking control of all Silk Road trading there after. Similar to the Nabataeans, Palmyra managed to establish a high level of autonomy from Roman rule in the region at that time.

But taking Roman superiority thinking and their military

expansionist approach into consideration, the question remains, so how was this at all possible?

There were various factors helping Palmyra to achieve a high level of commercial independence rather than political. First Palmyra was a rather isolated desert city state with little intentions to expand its territory, so no real threat to Rome.

Secondly Palmyra was concentrated towards its highly lucrative trading activities. With nomad origins they functioned well as a tribal and mercantile society. Thirdly Palmyra was focused eastward, where all its goods came from and had excellent relations with Parthia a valued and useful political asset for Rome.

In addition Palmyra supplied Rome with all the necessary and valuable goods coming from Persia, India and China. The goods included various silk, fine porcelain, delicate glass, precious stones, elaborate fabrics, artisan leather goods, sandalwood, ivory, rare spices and unique perfumes. And, to further the level of connection, Palmyrans loved Roman culture and adopted

Roman life style. They used Roman names, even dressing and acting like Romans.

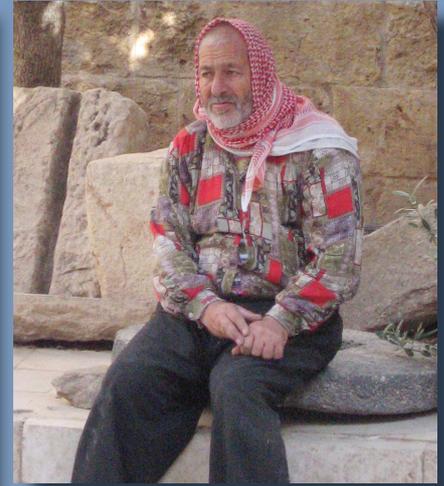
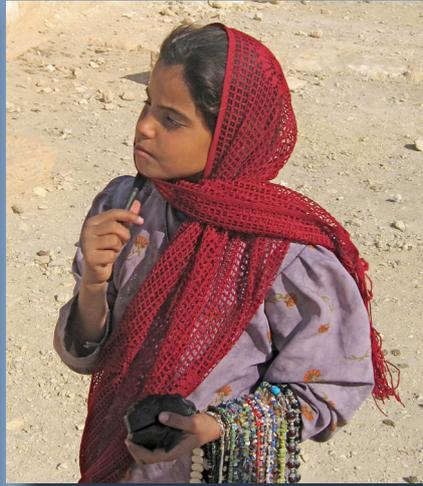
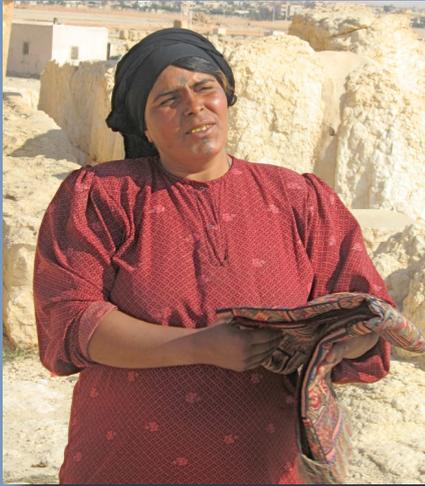
A Little History Lesson

The first small settlement in Palmyra dates back to the bronze age approximately 7,000 years ago and was established at the Baal temple site. Palmyra was first mentioned in antiquity 4,000 years ago on a clay table in Kultepe in Anatolia and on two Babylonian tables found in the ancient Mari city archives. This shows that long distance trading was already in full swing at the time.

Today the validity of old records is questioned, that the first major town like settlement was built by King Solomon around 900BC. These might be based on wrongful conclusions and repeated hear say in antiquity.

The first historic reports mention Greek Emperor Alexander the Great taking control of Palmyra in 331BC and establishing a Hellenistic suburb in the southwest on the other side of Wadi al-Qubur. When Alexander died 12 years later in 323BC, one of his generals started the Seleucid dynasty and rule in Syria, but due to being a small city





state and because of its isolated situation Palmyra was left alone and independent. Nevertheless Palmyra adopted Greek political structures with a senate and peoples assembly, again very similar to the Nabataeans who were their regional trading power predecessors.

But still they were an Aramaic kingdom like Damascus, Homs and Hama with the same language and religion, the only difference being that, with their desert oasis situation, they maintained their nomadic life style. This characteristic was actually of help when Roman Emperor Marc Antony took his first approach into the east Syrian desert in 41BC and found Palmyra deserted with all inhabitants and their belongings fleeing over the Euphrates.

Already 23 years earlier in 64BC Emperor Pompey had conquered Damascus and established Roman rule in Syria, and again isolated Palmyra was left independent and just

called by Romans "Community of Palmyrians".

Little is known about developments in Palmyra for the following 100 years, apart from the fact that sometime between 14-7AD Emperor Tiberius made Palmyra part of the Roman province of Syria and in around 100AD Emperor Caracalla declared Palmyra a Roman colony.

The colony status had huge advantages for Palmyra as all its inhabitants became Roman citizens and the city became exempt from Roman taxes. It became even better in 129AD when Roman Emperor Hadrian visited Palmyra and was so impressed about its size, wealth and sophisticated culture, that he declared it a free Roman city and renamed it "Tadmor Hadriana".

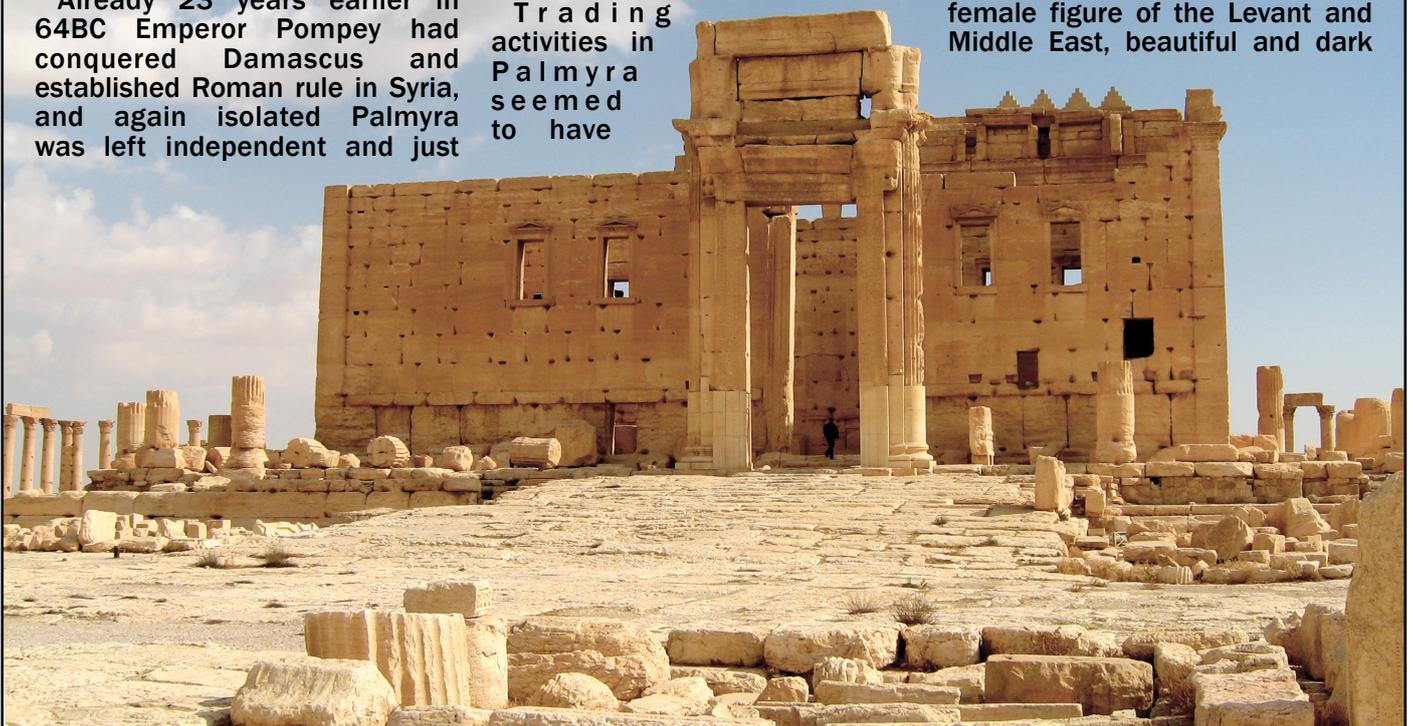
Trading activities in Palmyra seemed to have

developed without major war disturbances for quite some time benefiting all parties. In 257AD Septimius Odaenathus ruler of Palmyra was declared governor of the Roman province Syria Phoenice by Emperor Valerian and thereby also becoming a member of the Senate in Rome.

Only three years later Valerian was captured by the Sassanid king at Edessa (Urfa in east Turkey) and died sometime later in captivity in Bishapur. Odaenathus took revenge two years later and invaded Sassanide capital Ctesiphon near Baghdad twice. For his successes against Parthian King Schapur I and conquering Mesopotamia, Odaenathus received the title "king of kings".

The Famous Queen Zenobia

She was the most mystical female figure of the Levant and Middle East, beautiful and dark





skinned with a strong personality and highly cultured with the ability to speak many languages, such as Greek, Latin, Egyptian and her native Aramaic. With a love for history and philosophy she was also a keen reader of Homer and Plato.

Zenobia was highly respected by her people and her army, because of her diplomatic skills and courage. During her reign she converted Palmyra into one of the most glorious cities in the region. She took over power in 267AD, when her husband Odaenathus was murdered by his nephew Marconius and their seven year old son Vaballathus was still too young to take the reign.

She quickly took advantage of the power struggle in Rome and weakness of the empire to declare Palmyra independent. She expelled Romans from Palmyra and expanded the city state by driving Romans out of Syria back into Anatolia. Her well organized and trained army, famous for their skilled archers and camel backed warriors, expanded power quickly by conquering Antioch in the west, Bosra in the south, and Cilicia in the north.

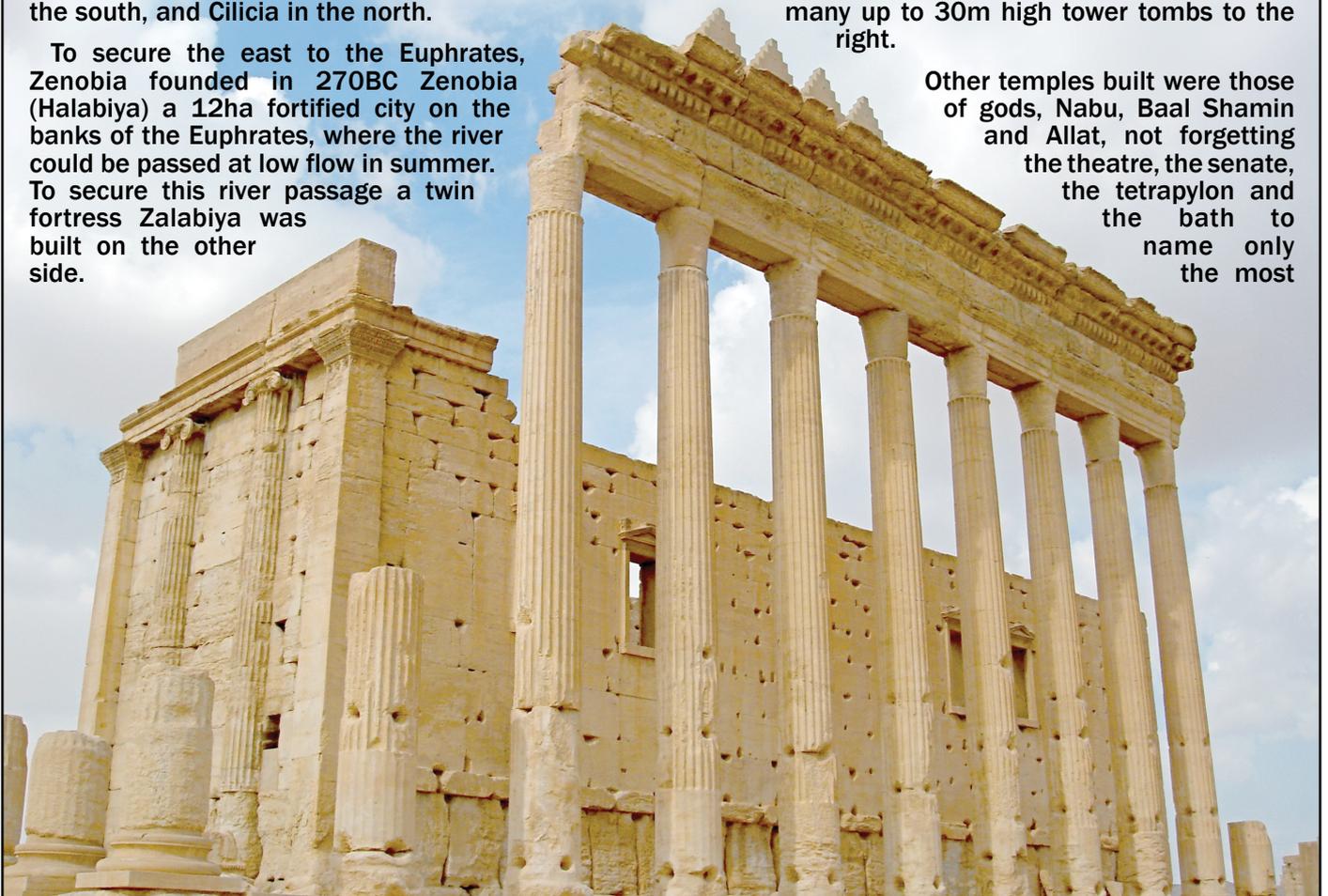
To secure the east to the Euphrates, Zenobia founded in 270BC Zenobia (Halabiya) a 12ha fortified city on the banks of the Euphrates, where the river could be passed at low flow in summer. To secure this river passage a twin fortress Zalabiya was built on the other side.

Zenobia also occupied for two years Lower Egypt. By that time new Roman Emperor Aurelian had regained forces and had won two battles at Antioch and Emesa (Homs) against Queen Zenobia. His forces took her prisoner in 272AD and paraded her in golden chains through Rome. Unfortunately her rule only lasted for five years and led to the total destruction of Palmyra a year later after renewed uprisings.

Ruins of Palmyra

Palmyra is the most eye catching archeological site in the Levant, similar to the other important ruins at Jerash in Jordan, Baalbek in Lebanon and Bosra in Syria. The best viewpoint is from the 12th century Qalaat ibn Maan fort built on top of the mountain. Later around 1630AD it was extended to an impressive fort by Lebanese Emir Fakhr ad-Din II. From here, visitors can see the full extent of the ruined city, with the 3km long colonnaded main street, the immense so-called agora forum in the center, the huge Baal temple at its end, and many up to 30m high tower tombs to the right.

Other temples built were those of gods, Nabu, Baal Shamin and Allat, not forgetting the theatre, the senate, the tetrapylon and the bath to name only the most



important structures still clearly visible with many impressive rows of columns rising into the blue desert sky.

It is really the desert environment which makes Palmyra so special. I will be limiting my notes to cover only the most important buildings described below.

Impressive Baal Temple

The size of this temple manifests the importance of the main deity Baal or Bel, the god of gods, similar to Greek Zeus. Baal had Babylonian origins and was also worshipped by Phoenicians. This temple is also the only building in Palmyra, which is exactly positioned on the north-south axis. Being 210x205m, it is a huge temple complex once surrounded by more than 11m high tenemos walls, covered at the time by polished lime slabs and including three entrances flanked by massive columns, a structure measuring 35m in width.

On the inside of those walls a tall gallery supported by a double row of columns gave shade to worshipers. The main temple cella is built on a raised platform surrounded by 42 Corinthian columns. This sanctuary was reserved for the high priests of god Baal, who used the monumental stairs leading up to the west entrance. Inside the main cult object, a statue of god Baal was positioned in the center and was flanked by two statues of the sun god Yarhibol and the moon god Aglibol positioned in opposite wall niches.

During the annual pilgrimage on 6 April, the day of the Babylonian Akitu feast or New Year celebrations commemorating the deeds of Marduk Baal,

worshippers surrounded this most sacred cella seven times. At this occasion animal sacrifices were performed in the vast open area in the temple complex, which included a huge altar and basin right and left in front of the holy cella.

The construction of the temple lasted 13 years and the inauguration of the temple, the oldest major building still surviving in Palmyra, took place in 32AD.

The Allat Temple

Only ruins are left of the temple of the important war and peace goddess Allat, which is the oldest in Palmyra dating back to 50BC and is situated on the slopes of al-Husseyniya hill overlooking Palmyra and situated right next to the dominant palace of Queen Zenobia. It was donated by Mattanai, a leader of an Aramaic nomadic tribe, which tribe members also donated the Baal Shamin temple.

200 years later Taimarsu, possibly a member of the same tribe, extended the temple leaving the cella and altar untouched, but added surrounding walls and an entrance hall with six columns using some marble elements.

A marble statue of Allat was standing under a four-columned canopy similar to the Greek Phidias example. This important goddess was depicted by a lion, and a 3m high lion sculpture guarding an oryx antelope carried the text "Allat to bless the one who does not spill blood against this temple". Goddess Allat can be equated to Mesopotamian goddess Ishtar, Greek Athenae and Roman Minerva. Readers might recall that Allat was an

important Arabian goddess with its main sanctuary in Taif and was also worshipped in Makkah - for more detailed information on Allat, refer to my previous article "The Nabataean Pantheon".

During recent excavations a statue of the winged victory goddess Nike was found at this temple.

Other Temples

The temple for Nabu the god of wisdom and oracles, comparable to Greek god Apollo, was much smaller at 20x9m, with only 32 Corinthian columns and built around 100AD. It was surrounded by a colonnaded gallery with closed outer walls.

The fourth temple in Palmyra belonged to fertility god Baal Shamin. It was built in 17AD right next to a half-subterranean old tomb from the 2nd century BC. During history this temple was several times altered and lately rebuilt close to its original form.

The Central Agora Forum

In the center of Palmyra on the colonnaded 11m wide main street, flanked by 7m deep portica, lies the most important public building and center of Palmyrian life called Agora. The Roman forum-like structure measured 84x71m, had 11 entrances and was surrounded by colonnaded arcades with 200 statues depicting local dignitaries, princes, Roman emperors, high priests, military leaders, important merchants and caravan chiefs. It was used for public speeches, reception of caravans and welcoming feasts.

Incoming caravans could have between thirty to three hundred camels and each arrival was commemorated with a welcome



Zenobia Inscription



Zenobia Denarius



Decorated Urn of bust of Aglibol (moon god) in alabaster - 2nd Century AD



dinner in the adjacent 14x12m big banquet hall on the south west corner.

The market was situated on the south east side and measured 75x37m and was surrounded by a 10m high wall build of massive lime blocks. The famous commercial code stone was found in the agora and contained detailed descriptions of the taxes to be paid by incoming caravans on their goods.

The Palmyra amphitheatre offered 2,000 seats and its stage was made up of a two storey palace like facade with a double wing main gate and two side entrances measuring 48m across and with a stage depth of 10m.

Another important building was Queen Zenobia's bath, a huge complex with 85x51m with cold bath, steam room, hot bath, gymnasium,

change rooms, courtyards with water basins. It also had a piped underground water supply and was built between 175-200AD.

It is interesting to note that all columns of the impressive bath building were made of Egyptian granite imported from Aswan. The bath was converted for Emperor Diocletian, when he rebuilt Palmyra in 297AD to a Roman legion town, after Emperor Aurelian had destroyed Palmyra twenty four years earlier after two uprisings.

Palmyra's Necropoli

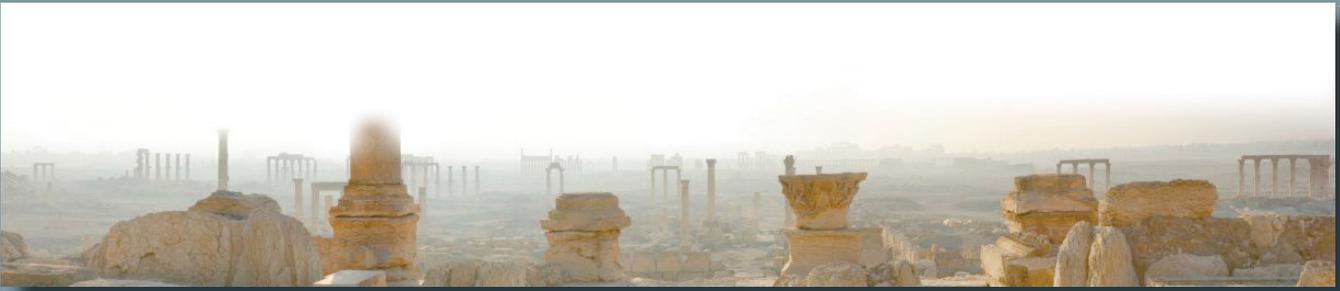
Distinguishing itself from many other ruined ancient cities, Palmyra has over 250 tombs, including some well preserved tower tombs, giving us a good insight into burial methods and rituals. There are three different types of tombs: the

impressive tower tombs, subterranean tombs and the representative temple tombs. All three types are distributed over four different necropoli areas called valley of tombs, north, southeast and southwest necropolis.

Starting in 100BC the first tombs, the famous tower tombs, were built. 150 years later Palmyrians started to use subterranean tombs the so-called hypogaeums, which were often combined with tower tombs sharing one entrance.

Then from 100AD temple tombs slowly replaced tower tombs, but subterranean tombs were also in use for another 200 years until Palmyra was destroyed. This leads to the conclusion that all four necropoli were used throughout the whole Palmyra settlement period.





The Famous Tower Tombs

It can be assumed that Palmyra invented this extraordinary high tomb type. The oldest tombs were towers built on hill tops with various burial shafts built into the outside tower base. Over 180 tower tombs are still in place today and they are impressive buildings with seven or more floors and a height of up to 30m and a base length of 5-13m.

Horizontal burial shafts were normally placed inside and each floor belonged to different families serving as their private mausoleum with some towers having up to 400 burial shafts, the so-called loculi. The loculi were situated on both sides of the rectangular chamber in a shelf system with multi layer

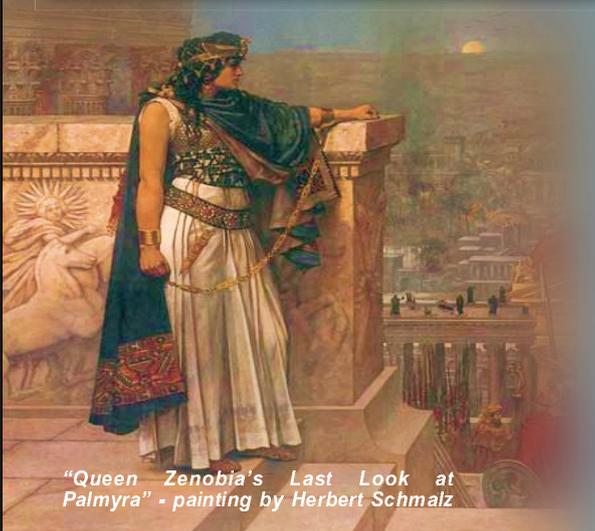
rows. At a later stage wealthy deceased were even buried in a sarcophagus and placed into special niches or chambers. The deceased was depicted in relief on the top plate in dining position lying down typical Roman style with his family seated at his feet.

The burial towers of Palmyra are certainly the best studied as they were the best preserved. The same towers were also found at Qanawat and Suweida in Hauran and at Dura Europos, Halabiye and Qalaat Djaber along the Euphrates.

The various types of tombs used at the same period of history confirm that Palmyra had an ethnic mix of population with differing cultural practices, of which distinctive burials were just

one. Temple tombs for example were built as representative double storey buildings on both sides of roads with columned entrances leading into a peristyle courtyard again with multiple layers of horizontal grave shafts along the side walls.

It seems that temple tombs were not as stable structures as tower tombs, as all have been since destroyed. In comparison subterranean tombs were carved into rocky ground away from major structures to avoid any stability problems. Most of them are not recognized any longer today, as their overhead structures have disappeared over time. Therefore some untouched tombs have been found and future interesting discoveries of virgin tombs are still possible.



"Queen Zenobia's Last Look at Palmyra" - painting by Herbert Schmalz



Stonework on a lintal from Baal Temple