Midst the sands of central Syria lie the ruins of the ancient city of Palmyra, the “Bride of the Desert”. Located on principal trade routes that in Roman times connected the Roman Empire in the west with Persia, India and China in the east, it was for centuries a prosperous and influential city with a vibrant culture enlivened by this cosmopolitan crossing of influences and civilizations.
Palmyra was at its height in the 3rd Century A.D. when its most famous ruler, Zenobia, seized power at the death of her husband Odainath in 268 A.D. Through skill, diplomacy and sheer will she greatly increased the city’s influence and territory, ultimately reaching as far as the Bosphorus until stopped by the Roman Aurelian (ca. 272 A.D.) who captured her and sent her to Rome as a prisoner. She died there and the city again fell under Roman administration. By the 4th Century A.D., Christianity was well established in Palmyra and some of the temples were transformed into churches. The late 7th Century marked the Arab period in Palmyra. The castle over-looking the city is attributed to the Emir Ibn Ma’an Fakhr al-Din (1595-1634 A.D.); however, some findings there point to the Mamluk period 1250-1517 A.D.

During the Ottoman period (1516-1919 A.D.), the city was virtually abandoned, trade routes and practices changed, and the city’s wealth dwindled away. Palmyra nevertheless remained a splendid ruin that drew tourists from far and wide. It was universally recognized as one of the most complete and best-preserved of ancient cities of the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire.

In August 2015 Palmyra was captured by ISIS Muslim extremists who boasted of their plan to destroy the ancient ruins found there, one monument at a time. The distinguished Syrian archaeologist Khalel al-As’ad, who for decades continued to unearth the city’s exceptional cultural heritage, was among the group’s needless victims. He was beheaded for refusing to aid the terrorists.

The Rare Books and Special Collections Library is with this exhibit sounding a voice against extremism. The exhibition is a small sample of images found in our collections of the architecture and other artefacts of the endangered cultural heritage of Palmyra. Among these are *The Ruins of Palmyra, otherwise Tadmour, in the Desart* by Robert Wood, *Voyage de la Syrie* by Alexandre de Laborde, Becker, Hall, et Léon de Laborde and *Corpus inscriptionum semiticarum* published in the 18th and 19th centuries respectively. Others are from the books and manuscripts from the personal collections of Creswell, Debbane, Pierre-Riches and Saba.
The Street of the Grand Colonnade

The Monumental Arch
Inscription and Language

Scholars have found over 2,000 bilingual and trilingual inscriptions as well as *reliefs* of religious significance among the ruins of the temples and shrines of Palmyra. Studying these has been the focus of much scholarly interest.

Palmyrene inscriptions are found mostly in the city itself and immediate surroundings, but there was also an extensive Palmyrene diaspora so inscriptions in the same script can be found elsewhere, from the island of Suqutra (south of present-day Yemen) to as far as Great Britain, due no doubt to the travel of merchants and soldiers.

We do not have any firm evidence about the native spoken language in Palmyra, but most probably a vast majority of its inhabitants spoke some form of Aramaic or a dialect related to modern Arabic. Greek was clearly spoken extensively being the *lingua franca* in the Eastern part of the Empire as well as being a language common to educated people of the time. Latin was used as well. All three languages thus appear among the inscriptions found in the region.

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1 I would like to thank Professor Jean-Baptiste Yon, Laboratoire HiSoMA in the université de Lyon, for the generous explanation and the provision of information about the inscriptions and languages in Palmyra.
Palmyra’s semi-independent political status and retention of Aramaic as a major day-to-day language of commerce and administration helped to guarantee the continuation of the city’s Semitic cultural and religious traditions.

Aramaic Inscriptions from Palmyra;
Extracts from the Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum, 1881-

Inscriptions on Reliefs from Palmyra;
Extracts from the Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum, 1881-
Textiles

Many samples of ancient textiles have been preserved in Palmyra because of the ideal climatic conditions. These were all found in the upper stories of burial towers bearing inscriptions that can be dated between 9 and 130 BC. The existing textiles would seem to date roughly to that period, though one cannot preclude that some burials were made in the towers at a later date. Altogether, the textiles of Palmyra represent one of the largest and earliest collections of antique textiles in the world.

In order to preserve this heritage, the Syrian Directorate of Antiquities and the German Archaeological Institute coordinated an international project for the preservation, study, and publication of these materials. Most of these are now kept in the National Museum in Damascus.

The textiles fall into two categories: local products, mostly made of wool and linen, and imported wares from China, made of silk. Some woolen textiles are of the highest quality and were made with special yarn. We know though ancient tax documents that specific types of wool were imported, possibly from Latakia, which was famous in antiquity for its excellent wool.

Khaled al-As‘ad

Syrian archaeologist Khaled al-As‘ad was the Keeper of Palmyra. He held the position of Head of Antiquities for over 40 years - so long that he actually came to epitomize the preservation of the site and its exceptional ruins. Born there in 1934, al-As‘ad took a degree in history from the University of Damascus and subsequently, working in collaboration with European scholars, devoted the rest of his life to conducting excavations and overseeing restorations of the city’s antiquities.


Thanks to his devotion and extensive efforts al-As‘ad succeeded in having Palmyra designated a UNESCO World heritage Site in 1980.

In 2015, Khaled al-As‘ad was abducted and held captive by ISIS militants for about a month before being brutally beheaded in public in August for refusing to reveal where valuable artefacts had been moved for safekeeping.

2 Schmidt-Colinet and al-As‘ad, “Die Textilien aus Palmyra”, 54-5.  
3 Stauffer, “Kleider, Kissen, bunte Tucher”, 57.
The Ambassador of Bologna Recognizes al-As’ad with the Order of Merit, Damascus 1998

Temple of Bêl before and after Destruction in August 2015; Google Picture
Praising Palmyra in Arabic Poetry

Inspired by his passion, the Syrian poet, ‘Adnan Mirdam, describes the civilization of Palmyra and mourns its ruins. The verses are a fabulous metaphor where the poet praises the civilization of the ancient city, imagining himself as a bird flying gracefully among its ruins. These ruins are the proof of an old history that once was a prosperous, vibrant present.

Bibliography

