

# A funerary relief from Palmyra in the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum



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**BILBOKO ARTE  
EDERREN MUSEOA  
MUSEO DE BELLAS  
ARTES DE BILBAO**

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In 2012 Javier Viar Olloqui donated to the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum a relief from Palmyra which he had acquired in 1996 [fig. 1]. A characteristic funerary bust from that ancient Syrian city, the museum's director had decided to add it to the permanent display alongside other classical works of art in order to create a new introductory section to the medieval and modern art galleries. This funerary image from Palmyra now presents visitors with a man from the past who engages with us through a seemingly real, lively gaze which opens a door onto knowledge of his era, our own origins and the foundations of our civilisation.

The provenance of the portrait provided in the catalogue of the auction at which Javier Viar acquired the work<sup>1</sup> refers to a previous auction held in New York in 1972<sup>2</sup> that included part of the collection of Thomas Barlow Walker (1840-1928). Barlow Walker was one of America's leading entrepreneurs of the late 19th century, who focused his activities on the timber trade while also assembling a major art collection. He was particularly active in promoting the cultural life of Minneapolis through the creation of a network of public libraries and other cultural centres. In 1879 Barlow Walker decided to open his home to visitors in order to offer public access to the paintings he had acquired, which included good collections of both European and North American art, the latter featuring numerous portraits of politicians, Native American Indians and famous cowboys. It has been said that Barlow Walker's collection contained a large number of fakes and forgeries.<sup>3</sup> After various transformations and changes of venue it became the basis of the present-day Walker Art Center, one of the most dynamic museums in the United States. Due precisely to that institution's focus on contemporary art and the organisation of travelling exhibitions, in the 1960s it was decided to sell the part of Barlow Walker's collections that comprised the Oriental art and antiquities. This Palmyrene funerary portrait was among the latter group.

It can be deduced that the portrait under discussion here was acquired by Barlow Walker on the flourishing American antiquities market and that it would have come from looting of tombs at Palmyra which at that date particularly increased the holdings of the Istanbul Museum, in which there are numerous similar works, given that Syria was under Turkish rule at the time. The Museum of Fine Arts in Boston has various similar objects from Palmyra bequeathed by Dana Estes, a publisher from Boston who died in 1909 and who had

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1 *Fine Egyptian, classical and western Asiatic antiquities and Islamic works of art*, New York, Sotheby's, 1996, no page numbers, lot 167.

2 *Sotheby Parke Bernet: antiquities and oriental art, the Thomas Barlow Walker collection*, New York, Sotheby's, 26, 27 and 28 September 1972, lot 304.

3 *Catalog of the Art Collection of T. B. Walker*, Minneapolis, 1907; *Catalogue of Paintings and Sculpture placed in the Minneapolis Public Library by Thomas Barlow Walker*, Minneapolis, 1909.



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1. *Funerary stela from Palmyra*, first half of the 2nd century AD  
Limestone, 50.6 x 46.2 x 25.5 cm  
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum  
Inv. no. 12/92

travelled to Syria in 1905. The Metropolitan Museum of Art has around twenty reliefs of this type, acquired between 1901 and 1902 from Azeez Khayat, an active Lebanese looter of archaeological material who opened a shop in New York in order to sell his spoils obtained in Egypt and Syria. Thomas Barlow Walker's purchase should be located among those made by the American museums given that there are close connections between this sculptural relief and the ones acquired by the Metropolitan. This was also the period of the first major American expedition to Syria,<sup>4</sup> which served to raise awareness of the major cities of the region, in particular Palmyra.

Stylistic features make the origins of this relief quite clear. The unique nature of art from Palmyra means that it is easily recognisable, just as everything relating to that city can also be considered unique.<sup>5</sup> The site of Palmyra has been inhabited since at least the Neolithic era and its survival is due to the existence of a fertile oasis that creates the characteristic image of the palm groves on the dry sweep of the desert landscape. The palm tree is in fact the origin of the city's name and also the meaning of Tadmor or Tadmur, the old Aramaic name that has been revived by the modern-day adjoining town.

Many elements of the city's history can be considered as unique as its art. Due to its central location in the Syrian Desert it soon became involved in military conflicts as well as in commercial and cultural exchanges between the Middle Eastern and European powers. The Mari tablets and Assyrian documents from the second millennium BC refer to Tadmor, while the Book of Kings states that Solomon founded a Jewish settlement there. Following Alexander's campaigns it came under the rule of Seleucus and it was then that the city started to grow at a rhythm comparable to that of other large Hellenistic cities in Syria. Pompey's campaigns brought it under Roman rule and it became an essential hub for trade with the east. It was visited by Hadrian, who raised it to the status of a *ciuitas libera* while also promoting the construction of large-scale monuments. The height of the city's fame and splendour was in the 3rd century AD when, following the death of Odaenathus, the governor who had proclaimed himself king at a time of Roman weakness during the Persian wars, his wife Zenobia seized power as regent to her son Vaballathus. Zenobia extended Palmyra's power through her conquest of all of Syria, Anatolia, the Lebanon, Egypt and Arabia, creating a short-lived empire from which she was deposed by Aurelian, who conquered Palmyra and took its Empress as his captive to Rome. The fascinating figure of Zenobia made her the subject of operas and plays and a favoured theme for historical and Romantic painters who increased the aura of fiction surrounding the city. The queen who defied the Roman Empire, already referred to by Boccaccio and Petrarch and the subject of Calderón de la Barca's *Comedia famosa. La gran Cenobia*, has ensured that a visit to the city has become a potent symbol of returning to the past.

In the late 3rd century AD, Palmyra was the site of a permanent camp established by Diocletian. Its importance and independence gradually declined although it retained something of the nature of a capital, both under Byzantine rule and over subsequent periods of Muslim domination, during which the city experienced the political transformations that have affected the entire region.

The monuments at Palmyra are well known due to the fact that the isolated nature of its location largely protected it from a greater degree of deterioration or looting, although from the 17th century onwards there are accounts by travellers who reached the very heart of the desert, attracted by the city's aura of mystery and its famous queen. In the 18th century the remarkable state of preservation of its buildings was disseminated

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4 Crosby Butler 1990.

5 Colledge 1976.

through engravings, and it was in the 20th century that the most active excavations and reconstructions took place. Nonetheless, the present civil war in Syria and the rise of Islamic fundamentalism led by ISIS has resulted in damage far more serious than that caused by all the previous centuries of neglect and abandon.

Among the many archaeological paradigms offered by Palmyra is the “Valley of the Tombs”. This is in fact a slope of the mountain located in front of the city on the other side of the Wadi-al-Qubur, the small river that feeds the oasis which sustains the city’s life. On the lower part of the slope is a succession of tower-shaped monuments that reveal the survival of a type of burial common in Syria in the first millennium BC and which was revived by the city’s inhabitants during the Roman period.<sup>6</sup> An additional innovation at Palmyra was that of organising the funerary chamber inside towers or alternatively hypogea through niches superimposed on various different levels and set between pilasters, the doors of which were decorated with a portrait bust of the deceased.

Tombs of this type could hold dozens of burials, suggesting a type of large family sepulchre which included more than just the members of a core family and which could have a group or collective nature. In some cases, new families acquired the right to use part of the niches created by the founders of the monument. From inscriptions we know that each of these tombs was set up on the initiative of a person whose relatives found the place a worthy site for his remains. The tomb of Jarhai, son of Elahbel, now reconstructed in the Istanbul museum, housed around a hundred of his direct relatives over the course of a century and was subsequently enlarged to house another hundred or so members of a different family. Similarly, the tomb of Jarhai, the son of Barikhi, which was moved to the Damascus museum and reconstructed there,<sup>7</sup> contains 291 niches of various different families.<sup>8</sup>

The funerary portraits from Palmyra are also extremely distinctive within their period. The depiction of the deceased, based on the Italic respect for *imagines maiorum*, had also manifested itself in such images associated with burial during the Republican period. In Rome we encounter numerous portraits of family groups associated with tombs, generally couples and sometimes accompanied by their children, but this practice did not survive into the imperial era. The way the Palmyrenes revived this type of funerary monument is thus surprising, while even more so is the fact that many tombs have depictions of a family group on the most important niche, with the father reclining on a bed and his wife and children behind him, echoing a type that had been commonly employed for Etruscan and Italic tombs.

The funerary monuments from Palmyra date from the most dazzling moment of its history, which is essentially the period between the city’s acquisition of its status as a free state from Hadrian and the short-lived reign of Zenobia: barely a century and a half, during which artists working in the city evolved an original and unmistakable style that anticipates the forms of Byzantine art.

These funerary portraits from Palmyra, and more generally its statuary as a whole, can be grouped into three phases.<sup>9</sup> The first runs from the mid-1st century to 150 AD and is characterised by clothing of Greek origin, with linear folds and a very rigid cut, in addition to the use of two concentric circles to represent the pupil of the eye and a hairstyle of continuous bands of slightly curved curls. In the second phase (150-200 AD) beards become common and a hairstyle based on full, spiral curls that indicate the adoption of Roman

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6 Henning 2013.

7 Seyrig 1950.

8 Amy/Seyrig 1936.

9 Ingholt 1928.



2. *Funerary stela from Palmyra*  
 Bilbao Fine Arts Museum  
 Inv. no. 12/92  
 Detail of the inscription

Inscription	Transcription
𐤕𐤓𐤕𐤓	Twdr̄t
𐤁𐤓𐤕𐤓	br Yr̄ḥy
𐤁𐤓𐤓𐤕𐤓	br Mqy
𐤁𐤓𐤕𐤓𐤕𐤓	'b' ḥbl

fashions while the clothing is characterised by softer and more dynamic folds. The eyes are represented by a small hole to describe the pupil, surrounded by the circle of the iris. The third phase (200-273 AD) retains the use of beards and thick curls but we now encounter an increasing naturalism in the folds of the clothing and the figures' poses are more animated. This classification considers that the rigidity of the features of the first phase and the manner of depicting the iris and pupil, which is not present in Roman portraiture until the mid-2nd century AD, is the result of Palmyra's contacts with the prevailing cultures in the Mesopotamic region, particularly the Parthians, who had previously dominated the region.<sup>10</sup>

In general terms, the differentiation between these three phases has been accepted by all scholars,<sup>11</sup> but new research has reassessed the issue using more precise archaeological data given that the earliest studies were only based on material in museums or on the antiquities market.<sup>12</sup> Through associating portraits with secure provenances from a single hypogea and with the dates that appear in the inscriptions on some of them, it has been possible to prove that the dating can be very different. The most important factor is a new awareness of clear relations between Palmyrene art and that of other Syrian settlements in the Orontes Valley. At the present time an extensive research project is being undertaken to compile the complete corpus of all funerary portraits from Palmyra, precisely documenting their archaeological date and their parallels with art of the region.<sup>13</sup> Nonetheless, the different hairstyles and changes in the manner of carving the clothes continue to offer a valid guide for determining the relative chronology of many of these works.

10 Ingholt 1954.

11 Colledge 1976, p. 68ff.

12 Kropp/Raja 2014.

13 <http://projects.au.dk/palmyraportrait/> (consulted: 1 October 2016).



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◀ 3. *Funerary stela from Palmyra*  
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum  
Inv. no. 12/92  
Reverse

▶ 4-5. *Funerary stela from Palmyra*  
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum  
Inv. no. 12/92  
Views of the sides

When analysing the example in the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum, the first point of focus should be its inscription, which allows us to identify the deceased person. The type of inscription is also frequently encountered in funerary portraits from Palmyra, which generally use the Aramaic alphabet in its local Palmyrene version, although in some cases the Greek alphabet is used.

The Bilbao example has a four-line inscription [fig. 2], located above the figure's right shoulder and precisely and regularly carved. This can be translated as "Twdrt (Theodorus, Theodoretus?) / son of Yarhay / son of Mqy (Moquimu?) / 'b' (Aba?). Alas!". The interpretation and transcription of the text was made by Dr Fernando del Río Sánchez, professor of Semitic Philology at the Universidad de Barcelona, to whom thanks are due here. He also made the following observations: "This sepulchral inscription conforms to models already studied and published. It consists of four lines in Palmyrene Aramaic written in Palmyrene epigraphic calligraphy, not semi-cursive. Some characters are partially damaged but are still legible. The name in the first line seems Hellenistic, which is not uncommon in Palmyra, particularly in the city's final period. The name in the second line is very common and there is no doubt about it. Finally, the name in line 3 could be Moqi(mu). Line 4 includes a very common name, 'Aba (son of Aba?). The exclamation HBL (Alas!) is a recurring element in sepulchral inscriptions of this type."

The portrait has survived in very good condition with no significant erosions apart from the loss of the upper left corner, which does not affect the figure or the inscription. It is likely that this corner was broken when the stone was forced out of the niche in which it was installed. The total size of the relief is 50.6 cm high x 46.2 cm wide x 25.5 cm deep, which is less than life-size, as is habitual in such objects. It is made of whiteish limestone. The carving is more roughly executed on the back and sides of the background block [fig. 3], of which the front face has been roughed out with a toothed or six-pointed stone carving chisel which has left clear parallel marks. The figure was then carved with straight-ended chisels and the stone more carefully polished in the areas representing the figure's skin.



The bust of the deceased person is depicted in high relief and is clearly separated from the stone background by a well-defined groove. The upper part of the head protrudes from the rectangular slab of the background so that it would have partly covered the surround of the niche that housed it, the shape of which would have been almost square and measured around 46 cm per side, corresponding to the ancient unit of measurement of the cubit, widely used in the Near East. In addition, the view from the sides [figs. 4 and 5] reveals that the lower zone of the torso is much thinner than the considerable volume of the head, which is depicted almost in the round and protrudes to a considerable degree. It can thus be deduced that the relief was made to occupy a niche set high up on the wall of the hypogeum in which it was originally located and that the sculptor aimed to emphasise the forward projection of the face in order to make it clearly visible from below.

Theodorus or Theodoretus is depicted frontally, wearing a tunic and a cloak that covers his shoulders, its right end crossing over his chest. The folds of the drapery are carved with shallow, sharp-angled channels distributed in the conventional manner. His right hand emerges from beneath his cloak to hold this crossed-over fold, the thumb covered by the cloak, the index finger extended and the other fingers closed over the cloak. In his left hand, of which the index finger is also extended, he holds a prismatic object that will be discussed later in this text. On the little finger of his left hand is a signet ring with a carved oval [fig. 6]. As an element that adds greater expressivity and which may have some particular meaning, the variety of positions of the fingers in Palmyrene portraits has been the subject of detailed analysis.<sup>14</sup> The serene, restrained position of this figure's hands may convey his male dignity in comparison to the shyness or modesty of some specific female gestures.

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14 Heyn 2010.



6. *Funerary stela from Palmyra*  
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum  
Inv. no. 12/92  
Details of the hands

Theodorus's face is the most carefully executed part of the work. His features reveal a certain rigidity due to the lack of modelling and linearity of the lines running down from either side of the nose and framing his mouth. His chin projects firmly forward and the nose is long and slightly aquiline. His eyes are large and very open beneath the thin carved line of the eyebrows, with the pupil and iris well defined between the prominent eyelids. His hair is arranged as four rows of curls that extend in concentric fashion from the upper part of the head down to the forehead. The central group forms a thick quiff while the other three sections become narrower and consist of locks, each made up of five curls, in a clearly repetitive arrangement. The narrowest band of curls continues into small sideburns that only reach half-way down the ears. All these devices are habitual in Palmyrene portraits and do not diminish from the expressivity of the final result, which always reveals a sense of vitality and an active communication between the figure's gaze and the viewer.

It is the style of the hair that permits an approximate date to be suggested for the work. The linear construction of the fringe framing the brow in a continuous arch is a schematic adaptation of the hairstyle worn by Trajan and many of his military contemporaries. Hadrian's reign saw the revival of the Hellenic style of the thick beard and hair with much more voluminous and three-dimensional curls, also to be seen in numerous Palmyrene portraits. A head in the Metropolitan Museum in New York [fig. 7] provides a very close comparison with the present one.<sup>15</sup> Both the features and the different devices employed are identical in the two works, although the surface of the New York example is less well preserved, is slightly coarsely carved and has rather distorted and excessively heavy eyes. Nonetheless, there is no doubt that the artist and date are extremely close. The head in the Metropolitan was acquired together with eleven other portraits and a family group in the same style and with the same provenance, from the antiques dealer and looter Azeez Khayat in 1901. As noted at the start of this text, there is considerable similarity between the works sold to the Metropolitan Museum by that Lebanese dealer and the one that originally belonged to Thomas Barlow Walker, which must have been acquired at that period.

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<sup>15</sup> Cesnola Collection 1904, no. 2048, p. 135.



7. *Male head from a funerary portrait from Palmyra*, second half of the 1st–first half of the 2nd century AD  
Stone, 26.8 x 24.3 cm  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York  
Inv. no. 01.25.7

A funerary portrait in the Palmyra Museum [fig. 8]<sup>16</sup> also has very similar features to the Bilbao example and a stylistic proximity that could be due to the fact that the two sitters were related or because they are by the same sculptor. The figure has a livelier hairstyle with thick, separated locks above the centre of the brow, while his features are more expressive due to some light furrows on his brow. The treatment of the folds of the clothing is shallower and softer, all of which brings the work closer to examples from the second half of the 2nd century AD. The present situation of the Palmyra museum sadly makes it impossible to gain access to complete information that would allow for a more precise comparison between the two works. We do, however, know that the sculpture was destroyed along with many others during the looting of the museum carried out by DAESH during the occupation of 2014 when the museum's director Jaled-el-Assad was tortured and killed.<sup>17</sup> As a result, it could be said that the portrait in the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum has now become even more important as a surviving example of this unique cultural heritage.

Given that the inscription's relief does not offer any information on Theodorus's professional activities, the object he is holding [fig. 6] needs to be analysed in order to deduce this. It seems to be two superimposed, small tablets on the front of which is inscribed a curious cross with its ends joined by concave lines, giving

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16 Ricci 2001, p. 252.

17 Jaime Alvar. "Palmira, la perla del desierto", at <http://antiqua.gipuzkoakultura.net/pdf/palmira.pdf> (consulted: 1 October 2016).

the appearance of a star. A similar sign appears on other comparable objects in Palmyrene funerary busts which have been interpreted as *schedulae* or supports for writing comparable to wax tablets, although in formal terms the identification is not particularly convincing.<sup>18</sup> Nonetheless the presence of this same sign on writing tablets above the shoulder of a figure [fig. 9] who seems to be holding the same type of supposed *schedulae*<sup>19</sup> would appear to confirm that both the object and the starred cross must relate to a professional activity in which writing played a key role. This “scribe” is one of the portraits from Jarhai’s tomb now in the Istanbul museum, of which there is another portrait with damaged hands of a figure with a small hanging tablet behind his left shoulder that also bears the cross symbol.

Among the proposed interpretations of this motif<sup>20</sup> is a possible legal significance in which the figures with these *schedulae* or small tablets are holding the document that accredits them as having acquired the *loculi* or niche occupied by their remains. Another interpretation suggests the intellectual preparation necessary for undertaking the path to the other world. This relative frequency of writing instruments and supports in Palmyrene funerary portraits has also been associated with the multi-lingual nature of a city that maintained its own alphabet and language that were different to classical Aramaic but which also made regular use of Greek and must have accepted Latin as an essential vehicle for communication in the imperial era. With regard to this suggestion, it is worth noting that a figure called Hairan, who is depicted on a funerary relief holding *schedulae*, is stated to be a *beneficiarius*, a retired soldier who was employed on administrative issues relating to army supplies or, in a more general manner, to the regulation of commerce. Palmyra must have needed a considerable number of these government servants and it is therefore likely that many of the portraits in which we see writing equipment depict such men. The portrait of Hairan the *beneficiarius*<sup>21</sup> shows him holding a *schedula* in his left hand and a *stylus* for writing in his right [fig. 10]. The *schedula* consists of two separate, open tablets, suggesting that they are not writing tablets, the content of which would necessarily be limited, but rather the two sides or covers of a case for keeping *styli* used for writing.

Finally, the possible meaning of the starred cross to be seen on the *schedulae* and on the larger tablets also needs to be considered. The way in which it appears in the Bilbao relief, with the concave strokes joining the ends of the lines, seems to indicate that it is not just a letter “x”, as has been suggested.<sup>22</sup> Rather, it could be an ornamental symbol associated with the professional activities of these scribes who were possibly military *beneficarii* and who made use of a corporate “mark” or symbol, reinforced by the presence in many of these images of a signet ring.

Among the Palmyrene funerary reliefs in the Metropolitan Museum of Art<sup>23</sup> that were acquired at the same period as this one, there are six more holding *schedulae* or possibly stylus cases in their left hands on which it seems to be possible to make out an incised cross. In addition, among that same group of portraits five refer to Moqimu as their father, grandfather or husband, which is the name of the grandfather of Theodorus on the Bilbao relief. A figure on a funerary relief in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston [fig. 11] is also called Moqimu and is depicted holding a trapezoid tablet with an incised cross in his left hand. This Moqimu is the grandson of Hairan, the name of the above-mentioned *beneficiarius*. It would seem that both the iconography and the names point to numerous connections between this group of portraits, which may mean that they

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18 Heyn 2010, p. 642.

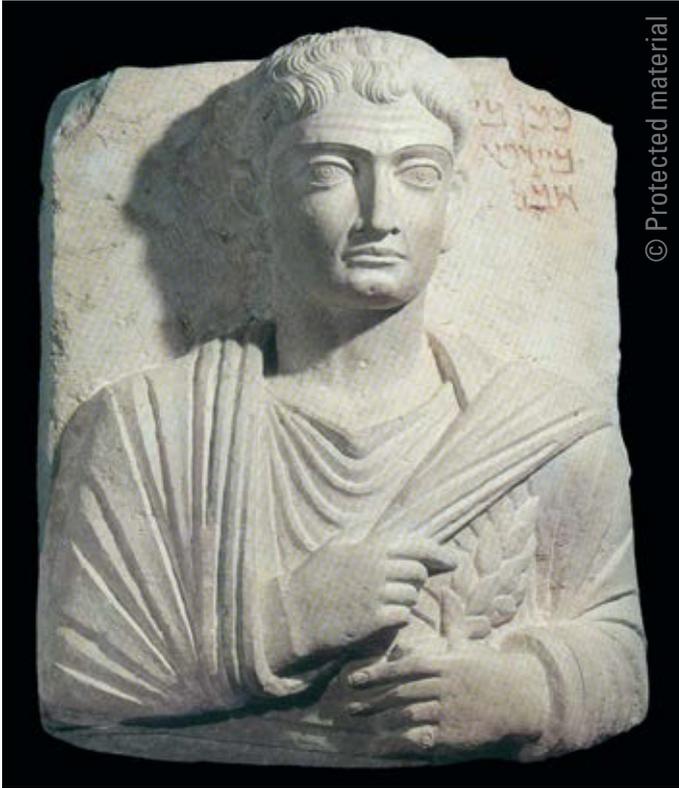
19 Colledge 1976, p. 69, fig. 80.

20 Sokotowski 2014.

21 Ibid, fig. 10.

22 Ibid., p. 381.

23 <http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search#!?PerPage=20&offset=0&q=Palmyra>

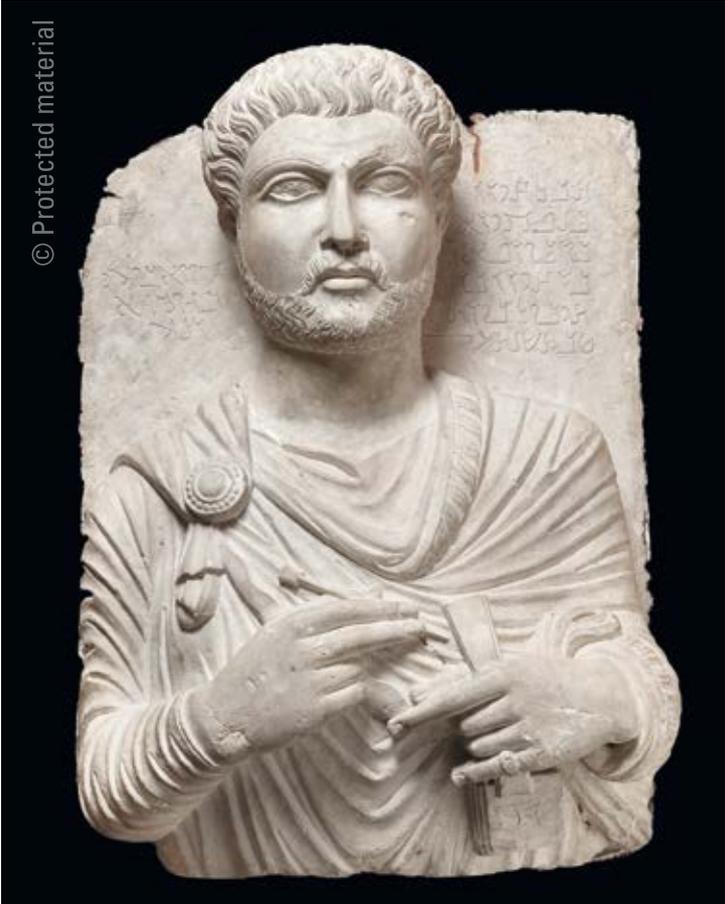


8. *Funerary stela from Palmyra*,  
first half of the 2nd century AD  
Stone  
At present destroyed. Formerly in the  
National Museum of Palmyra, Syria



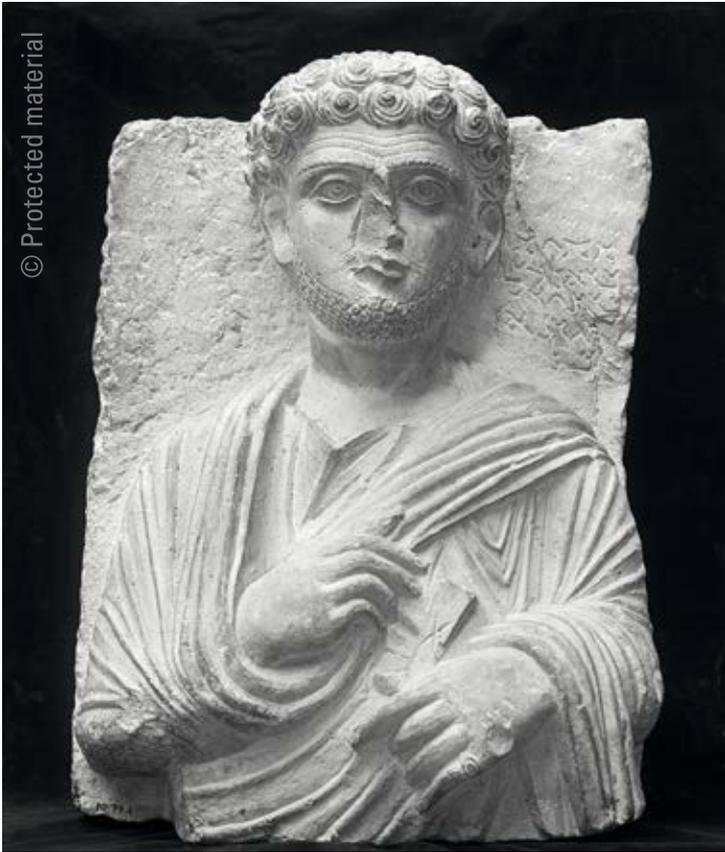
9. *Funerary stela from Palmyra*, c. 150 AD  
Limestone, 51 cm (high)  
The Istanbul Archaeological Museums  
Inv. no. 379

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10. *Funerary portrait of Hairan*, 189 AD  
Stone, 45 x 60 cm  
The State Hermitage Museum,  
Saint Petersburg  
Inv. no. DV-8840

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11. *Funerary portrait of Moqimu*,  
second half of the 2nd century  
Stone, 58.5 x 42 cm  
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.  
Gift of the Estate Dona Estes  
Inv. no. 10.79a-b

originally came from the same hypogea, looted in the late 19th century, and that the figures also shared the same professional activity.

The portrait from Palmyra in the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum thus opens up numerous directions for the study of fascinating aspects of the past. Its distinctive style, the fact that it relates to the thriving commercial activities of a city that became the capital of Zenobia's short-lived empire, and its excellent state of preservation, comparable to that enjoyed by the city's architectural monuments until very recently, all evoke a cultured, happy past that now seems to us a lost Golden Age of human civilisation.

The Count of Volney particularly contributed to promoting Palmyra's symbolic character as representing the decline of the great states of the classical world.<sup>24</sup> His book evokes the landscapes of its ruins as witness to the disastrous end that awaits all autocratic powers based on money and he considers that happiness and prosperity can only be achieved through liberty and the equal status of all citizens, free from the tyranny of religion. For Volney, the decline of civilisations is a natural effect of the passing of time, which always imbues them with the aura of an era better than the present one; however, the ruin brought about by the predatory actions of human beings motivated by greed and self-interest results in sterile decadence.

In the present day the fact that the funerary portrait from Palmyra in the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum is so far from its place of origin imbues it with the evocative powers of a past that we can still recover, in contrast to the tragic situation of the recent destruction of Palmyra caused by religious intransigence, the dehumanising effect of which we must strive to avoid at all costs.

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<sup>24</sup> Volney 1791.

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