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PALMYRENES ABROAD: TRADERS AND PATRONS IN ARSACID MESOPOTAMIA

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Abstract. This paper tries to investigate one of the most peculiar phenomena of mobility in the ancient world, that is, the emigration of the Palmyrene citizens who left their homeland and moved to some communities of the Arsacid Mesopotamia, creating commercial enclaves in it. We do not know almost anything about the internal organization of those, but surely there was a lower class, composed by merchants, and an higher class, composed by the so-called trade patrons or trade lords, whose duty was to help traders in their journey. The study is focused on the analysis of the evidences that shows patrons' and traders' activities within communities and institutions of Arsacid Mesopotamia. The aim is to understand the behavior pattern and the environmental conditions that enabled Palmyrenes to live and run their business far from home, and in a land ruled by Rome's archenemy.

INTRODUCTION

The famous city of Palmyra, located in an oasis in the middle of the Syrian Desert, was founded at the end of the 1st century B.C. as the meeting place of a tribal federation. Over the following three centuries, thanks to the incomes obtained from long-distance trade,

Palmyra became one of the richest and powerful cities in the ancient Near East, coming to threaten the power of the Roman Empire under the rule of Queen Zenobia in the 3rd century A.D.

Essential for the success of Palmyrene trade was the role of the traders who settled in important centers of Arsacid Mesopotamia, establishing some real commercial enclaves. Despite the scarcity of evidence concerning those communities, this article will attempt to shed some light on this crucial phenomenon which has often been overlooked by scholars.

An analysis of Palmyrene communities abroad is possible today thanks to material evidence linked to archaeological findings and, most importantly, the several so-called caravan inscriptions spread across the city. Because of the many important pieces of information contained therein, these inscriptions represent a unicum in the history of studies on ancient commerce. Their analysis is the key to understand the relationship between the inhabitants of Palmyrene communities abroad and their motherland, their interaction with the local population as well as the institutional relations between Palmyrene "trade lords" and the Parthian Empire.

PALMYRA'S COMMERCE AND POLITICAL STATUS

The earliest reference to Palmyra's commercial activity within ancient sources is provided by Appian (first half of the 2nd century A.D.), who, recounting an episode concerning Mark Anthony, taking place at the beginning of the second half of the 1st century B.C., writes:

> Palmyra, situated not far from Euphrates, to plunder it, bringing the trifling accusation against its inhabitants, that being on the frontier between the Romans and the Parthians, they had avoided taking sides between them; for, being merchants, they bring products of India and Arabia from Persia and dispose of them in the Roman territory.[1]

[1] App. *B Civ*. 5.1.9: ... Πάλμυρα πόλιν, οὐ μακρὰν οὖσαν ἀπὸ Εὐφράτου, διαρπάσαι, μικρὰ μὲν ἐπικαλῶν αὐτοῖς, ὅτι, Ῥωμαίων καὶ Παρθυαίων

This story, although considered anachronistic[2] in relation to Appian's age (that is, when Palmyra reached the peak of its commercial success), is still very important for defining Palmyra's economic and political attitude. Pliny as well, describing the Syrian city in the middle of the 1st century A.D., writes:

> … having a destiny of its own between the two mighty empires of Rome and Parthia, and at the first moment of a quarrel between them always attracting the attention of both sides.[3]

The ability to remain politically neutral was critical to the development of Palmyrene trade, which was based mainly on a route[4] linking Eastern Mediterranean cities and harbors with those of the Persian Gulf and the Western coast of India. This long and difficult route required some sort of agreement between Palmyrenes and the political authorities ruling over such lands, namely the Romans, the Parthians, and the nomadic tribes of the desert. Without such an agreement, it would have been hard for the Syrian merchants to safely complete their expeditions.

The route is most likely to have been established at the end of the 1st century B.C. However, it reached its commercial peak between the second half of the first and the first half of the 2nd century A.D., when the earnings led to a large increase in construction activity which transformed the desert's oasis into a real Hellenistic *polis.* A significant example in this regard is the construction of the agora at the end of the 1st century A.D.

A long debated topic among scholars is the political status of Palmyra during this age. As it is not my intention to delve deeper

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ὄντες ἐφόριοι, ἐς ἑκατέρους ἐπιδεξίως εἶχον ἔμποροι γὰρ ὄντες, κομίζουσι μὲν ἐκ Περσῶν τὰ Ἰνδικὰ ἢ Ἀράβια, διατίθενται δ᾽ ἐν τῇ Ῥωμαίων… Trans. White 1913.

[2] Millar 1998, 133; Edwell 2008, 35; Seland 2015, 110-1.

[3] Plin. *HN* 5.21.88: ... *privata sorte inter duo imperia summa Romanorum Parthorumque, et prima in discordia semper utrimque cura*... Trans. Rackham 1942.

[4] On this route, see Gawlikowski 1983, 1994; Meyer and Seland 2017.

into this subject, the article will only mention the main hypotheses that have been formulated by scholars. Many[5] argue that the city had been part of the Roman Empire since Tiberius' age, basing their claims on the inscriptions from that period such as some concerning Germanicus' involvement in the political and administrative life of Palmyra,[6] or the boundary marker defining the confines of the *regio Palmyrena* between A.D. 11 and 17.[7] More recent evidence has been used to confirm this assumption, showing the direct involvement of Rome in the affairs of Palmyra as well as the latter's integration in the provincial system. For instance, an inscription dated A.D. 58 quotes a tax collector, most likely working for the Roman than the local administration.[8] A milestone from Erek, not far form Palmyra, dated A.D. 75, quotes the governor of the province of Syria, M. Ulpius Traianus, and refers to the building of a road from Palmyra to the Euphrates (possibly Sura). This piece of evidence has been taken by scholars as suggesting that Palmyra's annexation happened before or near that time.[9] Worth mentioning is also the visit[10] of Palmyra made by Hadrian, who had the city change name in his honor.[11] This relevant event has also been interpreted as indicating that Palmyra was annexed to the Empire during an earlier period, with some scholars assuming that institutional changes, such as, for example, the status of *civitas*

[5] Seyrig 1932; Matthews 1984, 161-2; Millar 1993, 34-5; Young 2001, 123; Yon 2002, 1; Smith 2013, 24.

[6] *IGLS* 17.1.3; *PAT* 2754; 0259. On the three references about Germanicus in Palmyrene inscriptions, see Edwell 2008, 36-41.

[7] Seyrig 1941; contra Gnoli 2007, 188-90; Edwell 2008, 41-2.

[8] *IGLS* 17.1.536. See Millar 1993, 324; Smith 2013, 24.

[9] Seyrig 1932, 270-4; Gawlikowski 1983, 59-60; Smith 2013, 24.

[10] *IGLS* 17.1.145

[11] *IGLS* 17.1.245: "Hadrianè Palmyra" (see infra); *PAT* 0259: "Hadriana Tadmor" (*hdrn' tdmr*). See Matthews 1984, 175.

libera[12] granted by the Emperor to the city, may have happened around this time.

From my point of view, the abovementioned sources are insufficient to draw any definitive conclusions. T. Gnoli has effectively illustrated risks of adapting ancient sources to a historical reconstruction deemed to be probable, if not certain, *a priori*.[13] The present state of knowledge prevents from demonstrating beyond any doubt the exact moment or modalities of Palmyra's annexation to the Empire.

There is an important aspect that scholars often seem to forget when dealing with this issue: most of the commercial route followed by Palmyrenes was located in the Parthian territory. Since Palmyra did not pose a threat to Rome, this consideration suggests that Rome deemed more advantageous – especially during the 1st century A.D., the age of Palmyra's commercial rise – to leave Palmyra formally free than to incorporate it. Such status was indeed considered instrumental to the creation, in Mesopotamia, of the political *substratus* needed for the city's commercial success, which would have allowed Rome to benefit from the income generated by the goods reaching the Empire in terms of taxation.[14]

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[12]Seyrig 1941, 164, 171-2; Mattews 1984, 162; contra Millar 1993, 324-5; Edwell 2008, 46ff.

[13] Gnoli 2007, 185-6: "Poiché il passo di Plinio cozza violentemente contro la ricostruzione della storia di Palmira attuata da Henri Seyrig, il valore di questa dichiarazione è stato dapprima limitato come un semplice anacronismo, quindi si è attuato il tentativo di una vera e propria rimozione." Against the view of Pliny's passage as anachronistic, see also Edwell 2008, 44.

[14] See Edwell 2008, 49; Gnoli 2007, 195: "L'importante centro demico del deserto, che si era andato costruendo una propria precisa identità fondata sul commercio a lunga distanza, e che era andato crescendo tramite l'apporto di gruppi etnico-culturali disparati, entrò molto presto nella sfera di influenza romana nel Vicino Oriente. A seconda delle svariate fluttuazioni che la politica romana ha avuto in quel settore la città di Palmira ha anche ospitato funzionari romani e perfino truppe romane. La presenza di funzionari e truppe non deve

I have already noted that the institutional relations between Palmyra and the Roman Empire have been the subject of several academic studies. Unfortunately, only few of them focused on the relations – crucial for Palmyrene's commercial activity – between the Syrian city and the Arsacid state.[15]

The decentralized and feudal structure[16] of the Parthian monarchy granted great autonomy to the client kingdoms and the regional communities of multiethnic Mesopotamia. This was often a weakness for the Arsacid monarchy, as confirmed by the rebellion[17] of the Greek *polis* Seleucia on the Tigris. In some cases, however, the relations between central and local powers turned out to be beneficial to one another. An example is the "mutually satisfactory relationship"[18] between the Parthians and the Mesopotamian Jews, who enjoyed great freedom in terms of the political and economic organization of their communities. In return they always supported the monarchy in times of conflict, strengthening the Arsacid power in the Western part of the State. The most famous instance of collaboration relates to Asinaeus and Anilaeus, the Jewish brigand brothers, whose *de facto* power in central Mesopotamia was made official by Artabanus II[19] (first half of the 1st century A.D.) with the following words:

> I am granting to you the land of Babylonia as a trust to be kept free of pillage and of other abuses by your care.[20]

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però portare alla meccanica conclusione dell'inquadramento di Palmira all'interno della provincia di Siria."

[15] E.g., Gnoli 2007, 191-6; Gregoratti 2010.

[16] Plin. *HN* 6.29.122. On this matter in general, see Keall 1994; Gregoratti 2017.

[17] Tac. *Ann*. 11.9.4. See Dabrowa 1983, 84ff.; Brizzi 1995.

[18] Neusner 1976, 55. For other cases of collaboration between the King of Kings and local ruler, see Gregoratti 2017, 98-9.

[19] See Neusner 1964, 61-7; Brizzi 1995, 70-1; Rajak 1998, 314-7.

[20] Joseph. *AJ* 18.9.4: ... παρακαταθήκην δέσοι δίδωμιτὴν Βαβυλωνίαν γῆν ἀλήστευτόν τε καὶ ἀπαθῆ κακῶν ἐσομένην ὑπὸ τῶν σῶν φροντίδων... Trans. Feldman 1965.

This quote should be compared with a passage of Strabo's *Geography*, in which the author draws a situation where the lack of a strong central authority created political instability, which made it harder and more dangerous for merchants to travel along the commercial routes of Mesopotamia:

> The Scenitae are peaceful, and moderate towards travellers in the exaction of tribute, and on this account merchants avoid the land along the river and risk a journey through the desert, leaving the river on the right for approximately a three days' journey. For the chieftains (*philarchoi*) who live along the river on both sides occupy country which, though not rich in resources, is less resourceless than that of others, and are each invested with their own particular domains and exact a tribute of no moderate amount. For it is hard among so many peoples, and that too among peoples that are self-willed, for a common standard of tribute to be set that is advantageous to the merchant.[21]

This passage illustrates how one of the aims of Artabanus was to take advantage of the military power of the Jewish brothers for the purpose of restoring his dominion over Central Mesopotamia, granting the State with the large amounts of income generated by merchants, without having to spend money on patrolling the commercial routes.[22]

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[21] Strab. 16.1.27: ... οἱ Σκηνῖται τήν τε εἰρήνην καὶ τὴν μετριότητα τῆς τῶν τελῶν πράξεως, ἧς χάριν φεύγοντες τὴν παραποταμίαν διὰ τῆς ἐρήμου παραβάλλονται, καταλιπόντες ἐν δεξιᾷ τὸν ποταμὸν ἡμερῶν σχεδόν τι τριῶν ὁδόν. οἱ γὰρ παροικοῦντες ἑκατέρωθεν τὸν ποταμὸν φύλαρχοι, χώραν οὐκ εὔπορον ἔχοντες, ἧττον δὲ ἄπορον νεμόμενοι, δυναστείαν ἕκαστος ἰδίᾳ περιβεβλημένος ἴδιον καὶ τελώνιον ἔχει, καὶ τοῦτ᾽ οὐ μέτριον. χαλεπὸν γὰρ ἐν τοῖς τοσούτοις καὶ τούτοις αὐθάδεσι κοινὸνὰ φορισθῆναι μέτρον τὸ τῷ ἐμπόρῳ λυσιτελές. Trans. Jones 1930. For a discussion of Strabo's passage and in general on the dangers for merchants traveling through Mesopotamia and Syrian Desert, see Seland 2015, 108-11.

[22] For Jew's role in Mesopotamian commerce of the 1st century A.D., see Raschke 1978, 642-3; Brizzi 1995, 72-3; Gregoratti 2015b, 52-5.

From my perspective, a similar pattern can be found in the relations between Palmyrenes and Parthians since the second half of the 1st century A.D.[23] The Syrian merchants needed protection during their journeys as well as resting points along the way. This brought the most influential members of Palmyrene communities hold political and military offices abroad in the lands ruled by the Arsacid king or his client kings.

THE PATRON'S ROLE IN MESOPOTAMIA

The leading role of Palmyra's trade lords in organizing and monitoring trade is clear from an analysis of caravan inscriptions. These testify the gratitude of long-distance traders towards their patrons for helping them in many ways, sometimes specified, sometimes not.

Studying the patron class and its involvement in the Palmyrene commerce is a very complex endeavor. Many assumptions have been made on the different roles of *synodiarchai*, *archemporoi*, and other individuals mentioned within the inscriptions as well as on whether the assistance the patrons provided was a regular liturgy, as in the Greek world, or an individual act tied to specific needs of the traders.[24] It is not the aim of this contribution to address these complex questions. Instead, its focus is on a number of specific cases offering a better understanding of the relationship between Palmyrene lords' identity and the institutional offices they held abroad.

One of the most famous patrons is Marcus Ulpius Yarhai.[25] Some inscriptions show the support he granted to the merchants coming

[23] Following inscriptions and archaeological evidences from Palmyra (development of the agora, increasing of caravan inscriptions, etc.), this seems to be the initial period of Palmyra's commercial acme. See Smith 2013, 75ff.

[24] On this matter, see Will 1957; Young 2001; Yon 2002; Seland 2014.

[25] *IGLS* 17.1.202, 248, 249, 250, [251], 255, 256, [313]; Teixidor 1984, 18-9; Yon 2002, 288; Seland 2014, 205ff. In general, on Palmyrenes in India, see Delplace 2003.

from Spasinou Charax and Scythia (i.e., India) in the middle of the 2nd century A.D. Charax was the capital of Characene, a Parthian client kingdom located in current Southern Iraq. This city was very important for long-distance trade with India because, as the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* (36) testifies, its port Apologos was the destination of ships coming from Barygaza (the most important commercial hub of the Indian's Western coast) sailing through the Persian Gulf.

The inscriptions about Marcus Ulpius Yarhai are essential for the study of the Palmyrene commercial activity, as they are the only evidence that Palmyrene commercial ventures did not stop in Southern Mesopotamian cities to load oriental goods, but went so far as to their land of production.[26] Moreover, the inscriptions say that Yarhai helped in every possible way his fellow citizens – and maybe Characenian merchants[27] – living in Southern Mesopotamian communities, which suggest that he may have been one of the richest and most powerful personalities within the Palmyrene community in Charax.[28] This would imply the existence of some kind of relationship between him and the authorities of the Characene kingdom. If that were not the case, it would be hard to imagine how he could have managed to provide the kind of logistical and military support needed to ensure the success of such long expeditions.

Further evidence of the ties between Palmyrene trade lords and Mesopotamian authorities is given by the following inscription from the agora of Palmyra:

> Yarhai, son of Nebuzabad, grandson of Šammallath, son of Aqqadam, citizen of Hadrianè Palmyra, satrap of the Thilouanoi

[26] Young 2001, 128.

[27] Potts 1997, 97: "Was Honainu, a name attested at Palmyra only in one inscription, in fact a Characene entrepreneur, and not a Palmyrene at all?"

[28] Gawlikowski 1983, 65; Young 2001, 138. For a discussion on Yarhai's residence, see Yon 2002, 111.

> for the king Meherdates of Spasinou Charax. The merchants of Spasinou Charax in his honour, in the year 442 (A.D. 131), in the month of Xandios (April).[29]

The Thilouanoi were citizens of Thiloua, that is, the Aramaic version of the Greek Tylos, and the ancient name of modern Bahrain. The strategic relevance of this island for the Characene kingdom is attested by an inscription[30] found in Bahrain in 1997, which indicates the presence of a military base, and probably of a fleet ruled since the 2nd century B.C. by the "strategos of Tylos and the Islands" a Characenian officer. The discovery of this epigraph had an extraordinary importance because it allowed scholars to reevaluate the scarce evidence about Seleucid activity in the Persian Gulf and its shores. In particular, it showed the importance of a military control of those for the commercial policy of the Macedonian dynasty[31] and consequently for the Characenian kingdom.

Thanks to this epigraph, it is also possible to better define the way in which the satrap helped his fellow citizens: most likely, the naval forces under his command granted Palmyrene traders protection from pirate attacks, with the Bahrain base providing a supply spot for ships returning from India. Indeed, Bahrain is located exactly halfway from the Strait of Hormuz and the Gulf's Northern coast. The inscription is also indicative of the prestige and high level of integration reached by the Palmyrene community in Char-

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[29] *IGLS* 17.1.245: Ιαραιον Νεβο[υζαβαδ]ου τοῦ | [Σ]αλαμαλλαθου [τοῦ] Αχχαδανου | [Ἀδ]ριανὸν Παλμυρηνόν σατρά | [π]ην Θιλουανων Μεερεδατου | βασιλέως Σπασινου Χαρακος | οἱ ἐν [Σ]πασινου Χαρακι ἔνποροι | τειμῆς χάριν, ἔτους βμύ, μη[νὶ] | Ξανδικῶ. Trans. Gregoratti 2010.

[30] ὑπὲρ βασιλέως Ὑσπαοσίνου | καὶ βασιλίσσης Θαλασσίας | τὸν ναὸν Διοσκόροις Σωτῆρσι | Κη[φισό] δωρος στρατηγὸς | Τύλου καὶ τῶν νήσων | εὐχήν. "In the name of King Hyspaosines and of Queen Thalassia, Kephisodoros, strategos of Tylos and of the Islands (has dedicated) the temple, to the Dioscuri Saviours, in ex-voto." See Gatier, Lombard, and Al-Sindi 2002.

[31] E.g., Polyb. 5.54.12; Plin. *HN* 6.32.152. For a discussion of Seleucid activity in the Persian Gulf, see Salles ²1987, 98; 1994, 607-10; Kosmin 2013, 62-70.

acene, to the extent that one of its members was appointed as a high level officer of the kingdom. This, however, should not lead one to underestimate the importance for the traders' community abroad as well as for its protector of stressing their identity as Palmyrene citizens.

The satrap of Thilouanoi is not the only political office assigned to a Palmyrene citizen in Characene: one epigraph quotes an "archon of Phorat"[32] (the second most important city of the kingdom after Charax), and another mentions an "archon of Maisan" (as Characene was also called).[33] It is noteworthy that the latter figure belonged to the Abeis family, as did Yarhibol, another important Palmyrene citizen within the Charax community. Yarhibol is mentioned by an inscription[34] in which he is honoured by the Council of Palmyra as benefactor for the merchants in Charax, and particularly for conducting at his own expenses an envoy to Orodes, the king of Elymais. While we do not know whether Yarhibol had an institutional role, the inscription shows his political influence on the highest offices of the Southern Mesopotamian kingdoms.

The most likely purpose of Yarhibol's mission was to obtain political or commercial advantages for the Palmyrene community in Charax. Indeed, the kingdom of Elymais, which ruled over the current Iranian province of Khūzestān, conquered the wealthy city of Suse[35] around the middle of the 1st century A.D. This city and the region surrounding it were commercially crucial and connected from an economic – as attested by the circulation of Characenian

[32] *IGLS* 17.1.246.

[33] *IGLS* 17.1.160. Neither the archon of Phorat nor the Archon of Maisan is documented by the inscriptions, but they have been restored by scholars. However, the specific titles held by the two Palmyrenes are not fundamental for the article's purpose because, as Yon (*IGLS* 227) writes: "D'autre restitutions comme satrape ou même peut-être dynaste sont également envisageables."

[34] *IGLS* 17.1.227.

[35] Le Rider 1965, 426ff.; contra Dabrowa 2014.

coins in Susa – and cultural point of view to Characene and the Persian Gulf area.[36]

The inscription provides further details about Yarhibol's political role. It reports the acknowledgement he received from Bruttius Praesens and Julius Maior, important Roman authorities of the Syria province,[37] for his merit in helping Palmyrene communities abroad. Nevertheless, Yarhibol's voyage in Elymais should not be interpreted serving the interests of Rome, as argued by A. Smith[38] who compared it with that of the Palmyrene Alexandros,[39] sent by Germanicus to the kings of Characene and Emesa for diplomatic missions. Indeed, the Yarhibol inscription says that the Palmyrene self-financed the trip, which suggests that it was a private initiative with a "public" or "civic" goal, and for that reason he was honoured not only by merchants but also by Palmyra's city institutions. Yarhibol inscription, as well as the one quoting the satrap of Thilouanoi, highlights the double nature of the Palmyrene elite's role abroad: on the one hand, political ties can be attested with the highest authorities of Parthian and Roman States, but, on the other hand, there is a strong will to emphasize their Palmyrene identity and act towards the well-being of the community of their fellow citizens.

Despite the interesting cases discussed earlier, the most noteworthy information about Palmyrene patrons abroad are those concerning Soados.[40] While there are a few epigraphs describing his activity in Mesopotamia, the most remarkable one is probably the following:[41]

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[36] Le Rider 1959, 229-40; Raschke 1978, 817 n. 721; Potts 1999, 386.
[37] On the identification and the role of this senators, see *IGLS* 17.1.217; Smith 2013, 239 n. 69.
[38] Smith 2013, 164.
[39] Matthews 1984, 164; Teixidor 1984, 11; Gregoratti 2010, 25.
[40] See *IGLS* 17.1.127, 150; Teixidor 1984, 47ff.; Bowersock 1989, 162.
[41] *SEG* 7.135.

In the year [...]. The Council and the People (honour) Soados son of Boliades, son of Soados son of Thaimisamsos, for his piety and love of his city, and for the nobility and munificence that he has on many important occasions shown to the merchants and the caravans and the citizens at Vologesias. For these services he received testimonial letters from the divine Hadrian and from the most divine Emperor Antoninus his son, similarly in a proclamation of Publicius Marcellus and letters from him and successive consular governors. He has been honoured by decrees and statues by the council and people, by the caravans on various occasions, and by individual citizens: and now, he alone of all citizens of all time is on account of his continuous and cumulative good services honoured by his city at public expense by four statues mounted on pillars in the tetradeion of the city, and by decision of the council and people another three, at Spasinou Charax and at Vologesias and at the caravanserai of Gennaes. In addition, he founded and dedicated at Vologesias a temple of the Augusti [...] and in gratitude for his loyalty and generosity in his management of [every] position of authority (*dynasteia*) [...][42]

[42] Andrade 2012, 85-6: (1) Ἔτο[υς…] | ἡ βουλὴ [κ]αὶ ὁ δῆμος [Σοαδ]ον Βωλιαδους | τοῦ Σ[ο]αδου τοῦ Θαιμισαμσου εὐσεβῆ καὶ | φιλόπατριν καὶ ἐν πολλοῖς καὶ μεγάλοις καιροῖς | (5) γν[η]σίως καὶ φιλοτείμως παραστάντα τοῖς | ἐ[μπόρ]οις καὶ ταῖς συνοδίαις καὶ τοῖς ἐν Ὀλογασίᾳ | πολείταις καὶ επὶ τοῦτοις [ἐπισ]τολ[ᾶ] θεοῦ | [Ἁ]δριανοῦ καὶ τοῦ θειοτάτο υα[ὐ]τοκράτορος | Ἀντωνεινοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτοῦ μαρτυρεθέντα | (10) ὁμοίως καὶ διατάγματι Ποβλικίου Μαρκέλλου | καὶ ἐπιστολᾷ αὐτοῦ καὶ τῶν ἑξῆς ὑπατικῶν | καὶ ψηφίσμασι καὶ ἀνδριάσι τειμηθέντα ὑπὸ | βουλῆς καὶ δήμου καὶ τῶν κατὰ καιρὸν συν- | οδιῶν καὶ τῶν καθ’ ἕνα πολειτῶν καὶ νῦν τοῦτον | (15) μόνον τῶν πώποτε πολειτῶν ὑπὸ τῆς | πατρίδος διὰτὰς συνεχεῖς καὶ ἐπαλ[λ]ήλους | εὐποΐας τεσσάρων ἀνδριάντων ἐν τῷ | τετραδείῳ τὴς πόλεος ἐπὶ κειόνων δημοσίοις | ἀναλώμασι κατηξιωμένον καὶ ἄλλων | (20) ἀνδριάντων τριῶν ἔντε Σπασίνου Χάρακι | [κα]ὶ ἐν Ὀλ[ο]γασίᾳ καὶ ἐ[ν] Γεννάῃ καταλύματι συν- | {συν} οδιῶν ὑπὸ β[ουλ]ῆς καὶ δήμου καὶ κτίσαντα | [ἐ]ν Ὀλογα[σίᾳ ναὸν τῶν Σε]βαστῶν κ[αὶ] κ[α]θι- | [ερώ]σαν[τα…].

The inscription describes Soados as one of the most important citizens of the Palmyrene community in Vologesias,[43] a Parthian city near Babylon built in the second half of the 1st century A.D. by the King of Kings Vologases I for political and commercial purposes.[44] A second inscription[45] shows that he commanded a military force

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[καὶ (?) πίστε]ω[ς (?) κ]αὶ μεγαλοφ[ρ]οσύνης ἕ[νεκα](?) | πά[νυ (?) πάσα]ν ἐνχειρισθέντα δυναστείαν | [...] στωτο[...]ειρω|[...]ς στασι[...]. Trans. Matthews 1984.

[43] Gawlikowski 1994, 30; Yon 2002, 110; contra Gregoratti 2015a, 145-6.

[44] Koshelenko 1971, 761-5; Dabrowa 1991, 151.

[45] *IGLS* 17.1.127; Andrade 2012, 81-2: (1) [τοὺς ἀνδριάντας τέσσαρας χαλκοῦς ἕνα] τοῦτον τὸν ἐν | [ἱερῷ Ἀθην]ᾶς ἕνα δὲ 41 τὸν ἐν ἱερῷ ἄλσει ἕνα δὲ τὸν | [ἐν ἱερῷ Ἄρεο]ς καὶ ἕνα τὸν ἐν ἱερῷ Ἀταργάτειος | [τοὺς] ἐγηγερμένους παρὰ τοῖς πρώτοις | (5) τέσσαρσι ἀνδριᾶσι τοῖς ἀνεγερθεῖσι | ὑπὸ τῆς πρώτης συνοδίας Σοαδῳ Βωλιαδους | τοῦ Σοαδου τοῦ Θαιμισαμσου εὐσεβεῖ καὶ φιλο- | πατρίδι τῷ διὰ τὴν αὐτοῦ εὔνοιαν καὶ μεγαλο- | φροσύνην τὴν πρὸς τοὺς πολείτας παντὶ | (10) τρόπῳ κεκοσμημένῳ ἀρεταῖς καὶ μεγίσ- | ταις τειμαῖς ἀνέστησεν ἡ ἀπὸ Ὁλογασίας ἀνα- | βᾶσα συνοδία πάντων Παλμυρηνῶν, ἐπεὶ | προώρμησεν ἐπισήμως παραλαβὼν μ[ε]- | θ′ ἑαυτοῦ πολλὴν δύναμιν καὶ ἀντέστ[η] | (15) [Αβ]δαλλαθῳ Εειθηνῳ καὶ τοῖς ὑπ′ αὐτοῦ συναχθεῖσι ἀπὸ π.[7 letters] | δ.[7 letters] ληστη]ριοῖς τοῖς ἐπὶ χρόνον ἐνεδρεύσασι ἀδικῆσαι τὴν σ[υνοδίαν] | [10 letters] προσδιέσωσεν αὐτοὺς. Διὰ τοῦτο ἀνήγειραν 42 αὐτῷ | [τοὺς ἀνδριάντας (?)] τειμῆς χάριν, συνοδιαρχούντων Μαλη Συμωνου | [12 letters] καὶ Ε]ννιβήλου Συμωνου τοῦ Βαζεκη ἔτους ενυ᾽μη[νὸς] Δαισίου. "[The four bronze statues], this [one] in the [temple of Athena], one in the sacred grove, one [in the temple of Ares], and one in the temple of Atargatis, which have been raised next to the first four statues raised by the first caravan for Soados, son of Boliades, son of Soados, son of Thaimisamsos, pious and patriotic, who has been adorned with virtues and the greatest honors because of his good-will and generosity toward his citizens in every capacity, the caravan of all Palmyrenes that came up from Vologasias raised because taking a large force with him, he advanced conspicuously and opposed [Ab]dallathos, from Eeithe, and those who had been assembled by him from [... robbers] who had been laying an ambush for much time to harm the [caravan] ... He rescued them. Because of this, they erected for him [the statues] in his honor (τειμῆς χάριν), when Males, son of Symones [... and] Hennibelos, son of Symones, son

that allowed him to defeat a dangerous gang of robbers. The locations where the merchants and the Council of Palmyra installed statues dedicated to Soados indicates that his patrolling activity stretched from the Syrian Desert to Charax, covering the whole length of the Palmyrene land route. Most importantly, the epigraphic source reports that Soados received acknowledgements from the Emperors Hadrian and Antoninus Pius, and that he founded a temple dedicated to the Augusti in Vologesias.

While the letters received from the Emperors and the provincial governors are evidence of Soados' ties with Rome, they are insufficient to define his power and activity as "au service de Rome."[46] First of all, the honours he received from the Roman authority are always linked to the assistance he provided to the caravans. Secondly, the text designates his power as *dynasteia*, a word whose exact meaning is not clear from ancient sources.[47] It seems to refer to a personal power not institutionally defined but recognized by Palmyra's civic institutions which indeed thanked Soados "for his loyalty and generosity in his management of [every] *dynasteia* ..." Furthermore, the fact that Soados exercised his power mainly in Parthian territory[48] suggests that his main concern, as in the cases analyzed above, may have rather been the wellbeing of Palmyrene traders and, *lato sensu*, of Palmyra.

Unfortunately, the scarcity of the information at our disposal does not allow for a clear definition of the nature and characteristics of the role fulfilled by Palmyrene trade lords abroad. For instance, it is impossible to know if Marcus Ulpius Yarhai played in

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of Bazekes, were synodiarchs. In the year 455, the month of Daisios." See also Gregoratti 2015a, 142; Millar 1998, 127.

[46] Yon 2002, 105.

[47] For an analysis of the term *dynasteia* in the ancient sources, see Gregoratti 2015a, 143-5.

[48] Matthews 1984, 167; Yon 2002, 110; contra Gregoratti 2015a, 145-6.

Charax the same role as Soados did in Vologesias.[49] It is also difficult to ascertain if such figures were "de représentants 'officiels' de la cité"[50] or "were simply the head of the community of Palmyrene merchants in the city, presumably appointed to that position by the merchants themselves."[51] The political offices held by Palmyrene citizens in Characene are equally hard to define basing on the available evidence.

Undeniable, however, is that they leveraged their significant economic and military power for protecting and helping their fellow citizens' caravans. How could such remarkable activity be possible inside the territory of Rome's archenemy? E. H. Seland has shown that Palmyrenes' commercial activity was beneficial to the Parthian Empire not less than it was to the Romans.[52] Therefore, it seems natural for Parthian authorities to have been interested in preserving the success of Palmyrene business.

May this kind of relationship, based on mutual interests, have led to a sort of integration of Palmyrene trade lords into the Parthian Empire? The evidence concerning Palmyrene officers in Characene suggests that this is not unrealistic. This hypothesis can help to better understand the great power held by Soados in Vologesias and the building of the temple dedicated to the Roman Emperors, that should be considered, therefore, more as a concession made to Soados than a display of Parthian weakness in that historical phase.[53] Indeed, it seems unlikely that an individual as powerful as Soados may have been able to operate in a city so economically relevant, located at the heart of Parthian Mesopotamia, without the

[49] Young 2001, 144-5; Smith (2013, 239 n. 75) follows Young's hypothesis remarking, however, that "there is no evidence to suggest it."
[50] Yon 2002, 106.
[51] Young 2001, 130.
[52] Seland 2014.
[53] Bowersock 1989, 162ff.; Gawlikowski 1994, 29-30; contra Olbrycht 1998, 138-44; Gregoratti 2015a, 146.

approval of the Great King. Moreover, within such a multiethnic and multicultural Empire, a temple dedicated to the *Augusti* would have likely represented a cultural expression like many others and, therefore, not a major problem for the King of Kings. In this sense a parallel may be drawn with the persistence of a Seleucid's cult in Dura-Europos and Seleucia on the Tigris after the Parthian conquest of Mesopotamia in the 2nd century B.C.[54]

Although Soados did not hold any institutional office, his political role in Mesopotamia can be somewhat compared to that of Yarhai, the satrap of Thilouanoi, in Characene.[55] The peculiar structure of the Parthian Empire led the Great King to grant more autonomy to many local powers (e.g., client kingdom, satrapy, Greek cities) within the borders of the Empire, receiving in return formal submission in the form of economic tributes and military loyalty. In a similar fashion, it is not far-fetched to assume that the Great King would have been willing to acknowledge Soados' *de facto* power, in the same way that Artabanus did with Asinaeus and Anilaeus. The Palmyrene lord class – described by M. Sommer as a military elite[56] – would have guaranteed the King of Kings a great source of income, protecting the caravans and giving stability to the region in the same way the Jewish brothers did. Furthermore, despite the bond between Palmyrenes and Rome, the trade lords were likely to be more loyal to the Great King than other political entities of the Parthian Empire, which rebelled often in order to increase their power and autonomy. This is because the primary aim of the Palmyrene elite's activities was to provide starting capital, leadership, and protection, in exchange for commercial revenue and prestige:[57] achieving this goal required avoiding political

[54] See P. Dura 25 (= Dura Perg. 23); Hopkins 1972, 13-24; Dirven 1999, 119-22.

[55] One of Matthews' (1984, 167) hypothesis about Soados' *dynasteia* is that it could have been a "local satrapy."

[56] Sommer 2015, 181-2.

[57] Seland 2014, 207.

turmoil in Parthia by remaining politically neutral and continuing to act *inter duo imperia*.[58]

This political feature allowed what A. M. Smith calls "multiple loyalties"[59] and appears to be connected to the strong ties between the Palmyrenes and their homeland through institutions such as kinship, tribal affiliation, and citizenship. Referring to the existing evidence with regard to the enlistment of Palmyrene citizens in the Roman army, he noted how, despite such role, they often preserved and reasserted their Palmyrene identity within a foreign context. According to the scholar, what is most surprising is that such tendency was exhibited even by the soldiers who possessed the Roman citizenship and covered important military offices.[60] This calls for the question of whether the same statement could be made, *mutatis mutandis*, for the Palmyrenes acting in the Arsacid Empire.

Unfortunately, the evidence on Palmyrene patrons having a political role in Parthia is rather scarce and limited in time and space. For sure, the political context in Parthia between the '30s and the '60s of the 2nd century A.D. – the time frame of the inscriptions analyzed – and in particular the figure of Meherdates king of Characene,[61] could help in better understanding Palmyrenes' role, but these also remain unclear for scholars who dealt with it.[62] Moreo-

[58] Gnoli 2007, 195: "Palmira rimase almeno fino al II secolo avanzato una entità formalmente autonoma… così Palmira ha a lungo sostenuto il peso e la responsabilità del commercio a lunga distanza con l'Oriente, anche nei momenti di maggiore tensione tra Roma e Ctesifonte."

[59] Smith 2013, 165ff.

[60] Smith 2013, 172.

[61] See Pennacchietti 1987; Potts 1988; Bowersock 1989.

[62] For instance, see scholars' opposite views on the political and parental relationships between Osroes I and Vologases II (Olbrycht 1998, 138-50; contra Pennacchietti 1987, 178; Potts 1988, 151) or on the philoroman status of Mesene in this period (Bowersock 1989, 162ff.; Gawlikowski 1994, 29-30; contra Oblrycht 1998, 142).

ver, the complete lack of evidences coming from Mesopotamian cities is a big vacuum that do not allow us, at the moment, a full comprehension of this peculiar feature of Parthian and Palmyrene politics.

THE PALMYRENE TRADER COMMUNITIES

Despite the importance of Palmyrene trader communities abroad for the commercial growth of Palmyra as well as for the city's wealth and power, very little is known about their members' lifestyle and inner organization. In this case too, the main evidences that are available to us are honorary inscriptions left by traders arriving from the Gulf's shores.

The earliest inscriptions are dated, respectively, A.D. 19[63] and 24.[64] In the first one, the Palmyrenes and the Greeks merchants of Seleucia – most likely the city on the Tigris – honor their patron (of the tribe Mattabol) for helping them erect Bel's temple. The second inscription reports a dedication by Palmyrene merchants in Babylon to an important member (of the tribe Komare) of their community for the same reason. These inscriptions reveal the importance for merchants abroad to affirm their Palmyrene identity. In both cases, the devotion to the most important god of Palmyra and his city sanctuary underline the communities' ties with their motherland, with the inscription from A.D. 19 stressing even further such an identity by making an ethnic distinction between Greek and Palmyrene traders. At the same time, however, what emerges from the inscription is that even though the Palmyrene community remained a separate enclave inside the Mesopotamian city, there was some sort of integration between the two merchant groups, probably because they shared the same commercial goals. Indeed, even if this is the only inscription mentioning a non-Palmyrene merchant group, it is possible that other traders settled in commercial

[63] Yon 2002, no. 24.
[64] Yon 2002, no. 16.

centres across Mesopotamia may have benefited from Palmyrene patrons' assistance and honoured them in their hometowns in a way impossible for us to verify, given that the archaeological sites of those cities remain unknown.

In one of the inscriptions concerning Soados, the trade lord is honoured:

> … because of his goodwill and generosity toward his citizens in every capacity, the caravan of all Palmyrenes that came up from Vologasias raised because taking a large force with him, he advanced conspicuously and opposed [Ab]dallathos, from Eeithe, and those who had been assembled by him from [... robbers] who had been laying in an ambush for much time to harm the [caravan] ... He rescued them.[65]

These words highlight the dangerousness of the brigands defeated by the Palmyrene lord, who had probably been plundering the caravans traveling through Vologesias for a long time, causing serious damage to the merchants and consequently to the city's economy. Despite the lack of certain evidences, it seems safe to assume that Soados would have been honoured for what he did, maybe inside the city itself, also by other merchant communities settled in Vologesias.

The pattern of behavior outlined here can also be evinced from the remains of Dura-Europos. While the city on the Euphrates River provides sufficient evidence of the local Palmyrene community, a number of questions still remain unanswered. One of them concerns the nature of the Palmyrene community in Dura:[66] it is most likely that the residents were merchants, although a clear proof of that is yet to be found. However, what we do not know is whether they were involved in the long-distance or local trade between Dura and Palmyra.[67]

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[65] See supra n. 45 for the Greek text of the inscription.

[66] Dirven 1998, 87-91; Sommer 2004, 850-2; Smith 2013, 151-60.

[67] Smith 2013, 157.

The best-known aspect of the Palmyrene community in Dura is religious life. A Durene inscription[68] from 33 B.C. testifies the erection of an *extra moenia* temple by two Palmyrene citizens (from the tribes Komare and Gaddibol), dedicated to the gods Bel and Yarhibol. This not only confirms the religious ties between Bel and Palmyrene merchants, but it also shows, as L. Dirven[69] argues, how peculiar these ties were for the communities abroad. Indeed, unlike what happened in Palmyra, where the tribal gods and their sanctuaries had an important role in the life of the community, all members of the enclaves abroad seem to have taken part in worshipping only the most "civic" between the Palmyrene cults, that is, that of the triad of Bel. This religious feature is probably due to the homogeneity of the communities abroad, due to the fact that all residents were connected directly or indirectly with trade. Another reason may be that choosing communal divinities in a foreign context strengthened their identity and bonds with their mother city.

In spite of large evidence indicating the merchants' will to underline their cultural difference from the place they lived in, there is clear proof of their integration and collaboration with the local community. The most striking evidence is undoubtedly provided by two famous reliefs from Dura's temple of Gadde, representing the Gad (Fortune) of Palmyra and that of Dura, dedicated by a Palmyrene in A.D. 159.[70]

Gad Tadmor has the typical shape of the Greek Tyche, a female God that represented the city's personification in the Hellenistic world. Despite the Greek origins, some inscriptions found in Palmyra led L. Dirven[71] to infer that the original identity of Palmyra's Gad was Astarte, a deity whose worship was associated with that

[68] *PAT* 1067.

[69] Dirven 1998, 87-91; 1999, 28-9, 63-6; see also Smith 2013, 152; Sommer 2004, 851.

[70] See Dirven 1999, 99-128; Smith 2013, 157-60.

[71] Dirven 1998, 105-7; 1999, 105-11; see also Sommer 2004, 851.

of Bel. Dura's Gad is shaped like Zeus, the chief god of the city. Interestingly, Seleucus Nikator, who founded Dura around 300 B.C., is represented behind Zeus.[72] While stressing their civic differences, these reliefs prove the willingness of Palmyrene people to integrate into the foreign city, which paved the way to mutual cooperation between local and foreign merchants.

CONCLUSION

What can be observed from an analysis of existing evidences concerning Palmyrene patrons and merchants abroad is, *mutatis mutandis*, a similar behavior. On the one hand, we see a tendency for the two groups to emphasize their civic identity against the foreign environment and a great solidarity regardless of social positioning or tribal belonging. On the other hand, we notice a desire to integrate into the local communities and cooperate with local authorities.

The patrons denoted a strong political ability to pursue their fellow citizens' interests along with those of Mesopotamian (Arsacid and Characenian) rulers, despite the fact that they remained under Roman aegis, especially in the 2nd century A.D. In the same way, Palmyrene merchants carried on their business by collaborating with their local counterparts, displaying nevertheless strong cultural and commercial ties with their motherland.

This was made possible by the peculiar nature of Palmyrene society. M. Sommer argues on the "dimorphic social pattern" and on the double nature of the trade lords' political role concluding that "the institutional framework of Palmyra thus reflects the impression of its art and architecture: apparently Greek in its means of expression, at least at first sight, but thoroughly local in its contents. Palmyra was no Greek city at all, it was a city of the Near

[72] An interesting comparison can be made with the sculptural group with Tyche, crowned by Seleucus and his son, offered by Trajan to the city of Antioch after the earthquake of A.D. 115. See Malal. *Chronog.* 11.9; Dirven 1999, 117-9.

Eastern steppe frontier with a blinding, ingeniously "borrowed" Greek façade."[73]

The words quoted must be kept in mind when analyzing Palmyrene's interaction with the foreign milieu. Such relationship was based on a "functional" pattern designed to bring mutual benefits. The two dimensions of Palmyrene identity – civic and tribal – explain why the Parthians, despite the ties between Rome and Palmyra, did not perceive Palmyrene trade lords as a threat, but granted them important political and military offices in Mesopotamia as well as allowed Soados to build a temple to the *Augusti* in Vologesias. What really mattered to them was the patrons' ability to keep Mesopotamia safe, ensuring the prosperity of traders, and consequently of the monarchy. Similarly, cultural diversity was not seen as a problem by the Mesopotamian communities; integration took place on a practice level, that is, the collaboration to achieve the main goal of every trader in every time and place: the business success.

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[73] Sommer 2005, 292ff.

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