

## BOOK REVIEW

*Roman Palmyra: Identity, Community, and State Formation.* By ANDREW M. SMITH II. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2013. Pp. xvii + 293. \$85.00. ISBN 978-0-19-986110-1.

Smith has written an admirable study of Palmyra in the first through third centuries AD. He draws richly and expertly on the epigraphical legacy of the Palmyrenes, not only in Syria but in Italy, Egypt, and Yemen. His mastery of Palmyrene, Greek and Latin enables the author to present either full texts or key words from the inscriptions which are either in one, two or three of these languages. Smith also deftly breaks down the significance of these texts as to their religious, ethnic, and occupational significance. He traces the connections that the Palmyrenes formed within their families, tribes, and other cities to demonstrate the unique perseverance of Palmyrene identity by traders, diplomats, and soldiers, even while abroad.

Palmyra's location between Persia and Rome fostered the city's role as an intermediary between the two regional powers. Politically, the city emerged as a hybrid of the Greek *polis* but by the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD was designated a Roman *colonia*. As occurs so frequently in the epigraphic legacy of the Near East, named deities such as Malakbel and Yahribol dominate and seem to characterize the religious linkages of the Palmyrenes at home and abroad. Family names and tribal names reveal relationships characterized by bloodlines, patronage, and privilege.

Chapter One, "Framing the Narrative," describes the physical setting of Palmyra and also explores the major lenses Smith uses, such as theories of identity, community, and state formation. This chapter provides images of the city plan, photographs of various key inscriptions, and views of the impressive architectural remains.

Chapter Two, "Tribes and Tribalism," analyzes theories of sedentarization, nomadization, and urbanization. Smith supports the view that tribal peoples were attracted to the city, probably due to the wealth to be gained from the caravan trade. Smith notes the strong persistence tribal identity by the Palmyrenes, whether in their own city or abroad.

Chapter Three, "The Growth of Community," examines the shared religious affiliation within the oasis and argues that "the cultic atmosphere built social cohesion" (183). Palmyra's economic magnetism as a center of caravan trade is also explored. For both of these topics, the epigraphical evidence is persuasive and well-presented.

Chapter Four, "Mapping Social Identities," traces familial connections, both immediate and geneological. This analysis is possible due to inscriptions which specify both relatives and ancestors. Smith notes the ethic of reciprocity which characterized all relationships in the city, whether in family groups, religious clubs or occupational societies. This ethic evolved over time into a Romanized and more formal system of patronage by the third century. The honorific images of Palmyrenes seem to stare back at the viewer in a very satisfied and confident manner and project the uniquely blended influence of Greek, Roman and Near Eastern styles of portraiture.

Chapter Five, "The Civic Institutions of Palmyra," notes the development of such Greek institutions as a *boule* and *demos* by the first century. The visit of Hadrian seems to have inspired the city to become more Roman in its political organization and in interactions with Roman *imperium*. Smith argues that the "four tribes" of Palmyra pre-date the increasing Roman presence and that they were used by the Palmyrenes to strengthen societal bonds in the face of outside pressures in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD.

Chapter Six, "The Palmyrene Diaspora," traces the dispersal of Palmyrenes abroad for the usual motives of mercantile expansion. Their archers were used to protect the caravans and then took on service in the Roman army, first in isolated *numeri* and then as part of legions and *alae*.

Chapter Seven, "The Palmyrene Empire: A Crisis of Identity," examines how leading citizens of Palmyra watched in dismay as the Sassanians took over from the Parthians, captured the Roman emperor Valerian, and intruded into their merchant routes. Smith argues that the increased ambitions of Odenathus and Zenobia grew out of frustration at the inability of the Romans to protect them and then turned to a desire to control former trade centers. This ended in confrontation with Aurelian who first just conquered the city but later returned to suppress the Palmyrenes who remained ambitious for territorial power.

Chapter Eight, "Retrospect and Broader Implications," reviews the arguments that Smith has made throughout the book and then advances the positive contributions the book makes to discussions in the fields of frontier studies and Near Eastern-Roman relations. He rightly notes how understanding one city in

depth through the self-expression of its citizens can help historians better understand the whole issue of Romanization in the Near East, especially in competition with the maintenance of indigenous self-identity.

To sum up, Smith has provided a very readable and informative study of Palmyra which uses the inscriptional evidence to provide a better understanding of the total *personae* of its citizens in all the dimensions of their lives. Such a book increases our understanding not only of Palmyra but also of the gradual formation of identity, both for individuals and for cities in the Roman East.

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