

Status and Stasis: Looking at Women in the Palmyrene Tomb

By: [Maura K. Heyn](#)

“Status and Stasis: Looking at Women in the Palmyrene Tomb,” in R. Raja and A. Kropp, eds. *World of Palmyra. Palmyrenske Studier*. Copenhagen: The Royal Danish Academy of Sciences and Letters, 197-209.

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Abstract:

The abundance of female funerary portraits from Palmyra makes them a tempting source for assessing the roles of women in ancient Palmyrene society. These bust-length portraits created in the first several centuries CE provide a wealth of detail on dress, adornment, family, and, in some cases, domestic activities. Although it has long been acknowledged that the portraits are not faithful renditions of the actual features and appearance of the deceased, the variability of gesture, dress, attributes, among other characteristics, suggests that the Palmyrenes did have some choice in the way in which they, or their family members, were represented. The correlation between these portraits and any kind of reliable indication of women’s roles in society is unlikely, however, since representations of women in the funerary sphere in general are normative, presenting an ideal to be achieved or societal priorities. Interpretation of the portraiture is further complicated by the political situation in Palmyra at the time of its production. Palmyra came under the control of Rome at some point in the late first century BCE to the early first century CE, and the funerary portraits are clearly modelled on Roman funerary sculpture. It is therefore difficult to discern the reasons behind certain stylistic choices: if they represented bona fide local priorities or socially potent references to a Roman paradigm. In this chapter, I focus on the bust-length relief portraits in the Palmyrene tombs, and the ways in which women are distinguished from men. Rather than providing any insight into the actual activities or position of women, this analysis will focus on the way in which the female modes of representation changed during the first three centuries CE, and reflect on the societal norms or priorities that dictated these changes.

Keywords: funerary portraits | gesture | Palmyra | Roman art | women in art

Article:

*****Note: Full text of article below**

The World of Palmyra

Edited by Andreas Kropp and Rubina Raja



Scientia Danica. Series H, Humanistica, 4 · vol. 6

DET KONGELIGE DANSKE VIDENSKABERNES SELSKAB

Palmyrenske Studier bind 1 · Palmyrene Studies Vol. 1

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Printed in Denmark by Specialtrykkeriet Viborg a/s

ISSN 1904-5506 · ISBN 978-87-7304-397-4

Submitted to the Academy August 2015

Published June 2016

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Status and Stasis: Looking at Women in the Palmyrene Tomb¹

Maura K. Heyn

The abundance of female funerary portraits from Palmyra makes them a tempting source for assessing the roles of women in ancient Palmyrene society. These bust-length portraits created in the first several centuries CE provide a wealth of detail on dress, adornment, family, and, in some cases, domestic activities. Although it has long been acknowledged that the portraits are not faithful renditions of the actual features and appearance of the deceased,² the variability of gesture, dress, attributes, among other characteristics, suggests that the Palmyrenes did have some choice in the way in which they, or their family members, were represented. The correlation between these portraits and any kind of reliable indication of women's roles in society is unlikely, however, since representations of women in the funerary sphere in general are normative, presenting an ideal to be achieved or societal priorities.³ Interpretation of the portraiture is further complicated by the political situation in Palmyra at the time of its production. Palmyra came under the control of Rome at some point in the late first century BCE to the early first century CE,⁴ and the funerary

portraits are clearly modelled on Roman funerary sculpture. It is therefore difficult to discern the reasons behind certain stylistic choices: if they represented bona fide local priorities or socially potent references to a Roman paradigm. In this chapter, I focus on the bust-length relief portraits in the Palmyrene tombs, and the ways in which women are distinguished from men. Rather than providing any insight into the actual activities or position of women, this analysis will focus on the way in which the female modes of representation changed during the first three centuries CE, and reflect on the societal norms or priorities that dictated these changes.

Looking at a representative sample of bust-length reliefs that have come from the Palmyrene tombs reveals that women are represented almost as often as men.⁵ In this sample of 585 portraits, 323 depict males and 262 depict females. One could argue that numbers have been skewed by the preferences of collectors (for whom the abundant jewellery in female portraiture would be attractive), but a brief survey of the portraits in fifteen tombs for which we have slightly

1. I would like to thank Rubina Raja, Andreas Kropp, and Annette Højten Sørensen for the invitation to participate in “The World of Palmyra” conference and to contribute to these proceedings. It is an enormous honor to be included in a publication with such eminent scholars, and I have benefitted greatly from the stimulating discussions

2. Colledge 1976, 62; Parlasca 1985a, 387; cf. Sadurska 1995; Sadurska 1982.

3. Hodder 1982, 146; Hope 2001, 5; Dillon 2006, 62; Davies 2008, 213.

4. Edwell 2008, 34-50.

5. As part of my research on gesture in Palmyrene funerary portraiture (Heyn 2010), I assembled a database of Palmyrene portraits in 2006. This database was compiled by requesting or acquiring images of the Palmyrene portraits held in most of the museums in North America and western Europe, as well as the accessible portion of the collections in Damascus and Palmyra. Although it will pale in comparison to that currently being assembled by the scholars working for the Palmyra Portrait Project (<http://projects.au.dk/palmyraportrait/>), my database should be adequate for the purpose of showing patterns in the corpus because of the size of the sample.

Fig. 1: Palmyrene funerary portrait of woman making “palm out” gesture, British Museum 125203 (Trustees of the British Museum).



more reliable provenance data indicates a similar ratio: for every eleven male portraits, there are eight female portraits, roughly three to two.⁶ The reliefs that were still in situ in these same tombs reveal that both men and women appear in the same high traffic areas in the tomb, usually clustered around the banquet scenes, if they are present.⁷

6. Sadurska and Bounni 1994; For a discussion of the similarly high number of portrait statues of women in the civic sphere in Rome, see Davies 2008, 207.

7. For example: the Hypogeum of Bôlhâ, son of Nebôsûrî

Gendered differences

Portraits of women differ in a number of ways from those of the men. Not surprisingly, dress is slightly different for the two groups. The majority of men depicted in the relief portraits wear the Greco-Roman tunic and cloak, with the right arm held in the sling

(Sadurska and Bounni, 70); the Hypogeum of Iarhai, son of Barikhi (Amy and Seyrig 1936, 233-234); the Hypogeum of Šalamallat, son of Malikû (Sadurska and Bounni 1994, 149-151); and the Hypogeum of the family of Artaban, son of ‘Ogga (Sadurska and Bounni 1994, 25).

created by the folds of the drapery. However, two groups of men, caravan leaders and priests, set themselves apart by their dress in the portraiture. The caravan leader, for example, frequently wears his cloak thrown backwards across the shoulders. Under this loose cloak, instead of the usual short-sleeved tunic, he wears a long-sleeved tunic. The second group to stand out is the priests. In addition to a tall and cylindrical hat, priests often wear a riding cloak attached on the right shoulder with a brooch. Some priests do wear the Greco-Roman tunic and cloak, but the opposite: a man wearing the distinguishing cloak without also holding sacerdotal attributes is rarely seen.⁸ Evidence from elsewhere in the city demonstrates that priests don special dress when they are participating in sacred activities such as burning incense.⁹ The choice to wear distinguishing articles of clothing in the funerary portraiture may be a deliberate reference to their participation in ritual activities.¹⁰ The existence of portraits such as these of priests and caravan leaders reminds us that some level of particularity was possible, and that dress could be used to draw attention to certain facets of a person's identity.

Most of the women depicted in Palmyrene funerary portraiture dress in the standard tunic and cloak, as well as a turban and veil on the head (*fig. 1*). Perhaps the most distinguishing factor among the represented females is the quantity and type of jewellery worn. Palmyrene women are well known for their elaborate displays of jewellery, particularly in the second and third centuries CE (*fig. 2*). In addition to the fibula, which attaches the cloak on the left shoulder, many of the women wear a diadem across the forehead, as well as earrings, bracelets, rings and necklaces.¹¹

A small subset of women distinguishes themselves by means of their dress (or lack thereof): women who

are identified as mourners.¹² These women sometimes leave their hair down, but are more easily identifiable by their attire: they wear the cloak, occasionally still attached on the left shoulder with brooch, but with no tunic underneath.¹³ Ritual gashes are sometimes visible on the bared chest. Four of the five women who appear in such a state are part of double portraits in which the mourning woman places her arm around the adjacent figure.¹⁴ Although dress is not the only signifier in mourning scenes such as this (where body modification and companions clearly also played a part), it is interesting to note that female costume could be manipulated. In other words, the tunic and cloak, in combination with the turban and veil on the head, were not the only option and perhaps represent a deliberate choice. The meaning associated with this dress is not easily ascertained, although choosing to dress in a similar manner would suggest some sense of a group identity.

Both men and women hold attributes, but there is rarely any crossover between the types. The most common attribute for the men is the book-roll. Whether this attribute has any significance beyond an indication of literacy is not clear.¹⁵ Some men hold items that are related to their professions. Priests hold objects used in ritual activities: a jug and a bowl for incense, and men associated with the caravans hold a sword and/or a whip.¹⁶ If we assume from these last two examples that attributes can be an indication of function or profession, for women the focus is on the domestic sphere, at least in the early period, when

8. For a discussion of priestly dress in Palmyra, see Ingholt 1934 and Stucky 1973.

9. For drawings of the reliefs on the peristyle beams from the Temple of Bel, see Seyrig et al. 1975; for a discussion of these scenes, see Seyrig 1934 and Stucky 1973, 164.

10. Heyn 2008.

11. Mackay 1949.

12. Colledge 1976, 70, 214.

13. Beirut, American University Museum, 33.12 (Ingholt 1934, 40-42, pl. X.1); Istanbul Archaeological Museum, 3725 (Ingholt 1928, *PS* 468; Mackay 1949, 173, n. 2, pl. LIII, 2); Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, 1025 (Ploug 1995, 210-212); Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, IN 1084 (Ploug 1995, 106-107, no. 31); Damascus National Museum, inv. no. 18795 (Zouhdi 1983, 316, no. 12, pl. 70d).

14. For the iconography of mourning women in Rome, see Corbeill 2004, 72.

15. Colledge 1976, 68, 154.

16. For background on priests, see Rumscheid 2000; Stucky 1973; on men associated with caravans, see Albertson 2000; Will 1957.

women commonly hold the spindle and distaff, both in the left hand (*figs. 1 and 2*).¹⁷ References to domestic activities such as spinning and weaving wool are common in Greco-Roman funerary portraiture, where such behaviour is often equated with female rectitude and virtue.¹⁸ The key or two which are occasionally suspended from a woman's brooch in Palmyra may be an additional reference to domestic responsibilities if they are keys to the house, but they may also represent the keys to the tomb, or perhaps, to the jewellery box (*fig. 3*).¹⁹ Three examples also exist of a circular object with seven knobs that is supported by the left hand.²⁰ If it represents a calendar marking the days of the week, it may serve as another attribute associated with the domestic sphere.²¹

39 relief busts include younger Palmyrenes in the background, depicted full-length, as small-scale adults (*fig. 2*). Of these 39 individuals who are pictured with the children, 26 are women and 13 are men, though it should be mentioned that the relationship is not always that of a parent and child: a younger sister might appear in smaller scale beside her older sister or brother, a granddaughter with her grandmother, a nephew with his uncle, and so on.²² In addition to

those portraits which include a child in the background, 16 women are also depicted actually holding the children. Only women hold children, always with the left hand, and two of these bare their breasts in a simulation of breastfeeding.²³ Taking into account that one portrait has both a child in the background and in her arms, 41 women appear with children in their portraits, which represents about 16% of female portraits in the database, versus 13 men. Despite this disparity, it is interesting to note that both men and women appear with younger Palmyrenes in the background. This pattern, as well as the identifying inscriptions that accompany these smaller-scale figures, would suggest that their presence is not a generic reference to the domestic sphere, as is probably the case for the children held in the female's left hand.

The hand gestures made by men and women in these Palmyrene portraits are eye-catching: not only because of the variety of finger positions but also because the most popular poses are very similar to those seen in Rome.²⁴ 251 of the 323 male portraits are depicted with the right arm caught in the sling of the cloak, and the extension of the hand over this fold of the cloak is the most common gesture for these men. In 70% of the female portraits, the woman raises one hand to the face or veil (*figs. 2-4*). Both gestures are similar to gestures seen in Roman Republican funerary reliefs, where the right hand extended over the sling of the toga alluded to citizen status, and the hand raised to the face was equated with virtue and modesty, but it is not clear if the Palmyrene versions had similar connotations.²⁵

17. Balty 1996, 438; Ploug 1995, 41; Colledge 1976, 70.

18. Sadurska 1983, 154; Parlasca 1985a, 395, 399; Sadurska 1995, 585; Sadurska 1996, 286; for similar iconography in Rome, see D'Ambra 1989, 400. For connotation of female virtue and obedience with image of wool baskets in Hellenistic Smyrna, see Zanker 1993, 222.

19. Keys to the domestic sphere (Balty 1996, 438-439; Colledge 1976, 70); keys to the tomb (Ploug 1995, 91); also see Ploug (1995, 91), who references Parlasca's argument (Parlasca 1988, 216-217) that keys might be for jewellery box because they were too small to function as keys to the house.

20. Examples include a bust in the Palmyra Museum: 1936/7028 (Sadurska and Bounni 1994, 44-45, Cat. 44), as well as another woman in double bust in Palmyra Museum B 1972/7064 (Sadurska and Bounni 1994, Cat. 80, fig. 20), and a columnar relief featuring two women, one of whom holds a circular object in her left hand (Sadurska 1983, 152, citing Ingholt 1936, 95-97, pl. XX, 3).

21. Sadurska 1983, 152-156; Colledge's suggestions for the identification of this circular object: a wreath (Colledge 1976, 156) key-ring, rattle, tambourine (Colledge 1976, 156, n. 608).

22. E.g. uncle with two nephews: Palmyra Museum, B

1961/7053 (Sadurska and Bounni 1994, cat. 69, fig. 56); Grandmother and granddaughter: Antakya Museum, inv. no. 9044 (Meischner and Cussini, 98-99, 102-103, fig. 3);

23. One is in the Fitzwilliam Museum (Cambridge, UK): GR.9.1888 (Budde and Nicholls 1964, 86, n. 139, pl. 46); the other is in the National Museum of Damascus: 6906/5840 (Charles-Gaffiot et al., 2001, 344, pl. 152; Zouhdi 1983, 315-316, fig. 70a).

24. See Heyn 2010 for an extended discussion of the significance of the different kinds of gestures made in Palmyrene portraiture.

25. For the connection between this gesture and modesty and



Fig. 2: Funerary relief of a woman and two children, Limestone, c. 150 CE, Harvard Art Museums/Arthur M. Sackler Museum, Gift of Alden Sampson, Richard Norton, and Edward W. Forbes, 1908.3 (Photo: Imaging Department President and Fellows of Harvard College).

Focusing on the female gestures, evidence from several of the sanctuaries in the city corroborates the connection between the raised hand and the female gender. In two different reliefs found in association with the Temple of Bel and the Temple of Allat,

groups of women are represented, all with their hands raised to chin level and held closely against the chest.²⁶ There is no indication that the raised arm is associated with worship in the funerary sphere. Another gesture that is associated with women in the funerary portrai-

26. Relief from Sanctuary of Bel: Seyrig 1934, 159-165, plate XIX; Colledge 1976, fig. 20; Tanabe 1986, pl. 42-44; Relief from Temple of Allat: Sadurska 1996, 286; Tanabe 1986, pl. 156.

fidelity in Roman portraiture, see George 2005, 44-45; Aldrete 1999, 65; Kleiner 1992, 40. See Leroy 1957, 306-342 for a similar gesture made by women in mosaics in Edessa.

ture is the “palm out” gesture (*fig. 1*) for which the woman holds her right hand up with the palm facing outwards.²⁷ The gesture is familiar in both Greco-Roman and Mesopotamian religious contexts as an indication of worship.²⁸ Depictions of hands alone held in such a manner on votive altars, as well as a fragmentary relief that includes an image of a woman in a sacrificial scene with her right hand held palm outwards, indicate that the gesture was associated with religious behaviour at Palmyra as well.²⁹ It seems likely that this particular gesture in Palmyrene funerary portraiture alludes to participation by the woman in sacerdotal activities.

Looking at Change Diachronically

Gendered differences in the way that men and women are depicted become particularly clear when looking at diachronic changes in their portraiture. In 1928, Ingholt divided the known Palmyrene funerary portraits into three chronological groupings according to their stylistic similarities to the small number of dated portraits.³⁰ A brief description of these groups, paraphrased from Colledge’s descriptions, follows here in order to highlight the iconographic changes.³¹ The portraits in the first group, from 50 CE to 150 CE, are fairly simple: the men wear tunic and cloak, with the folds of the cloak rigidly vertical as they come over the right shoulder, catch the right arm in a sling, and proceed to fall back over the left shoulder. The men’s hair is short.³² They are usually clean-shaven, and they



Fig. 3: Palmyrene funerary portrait of woman with keys attached to her brooch. British Museum 125023 (Trustees of the British Museum).

hold objects such as a book-roll, a leaf, the hilt of a sword, or a whip. The women in this group are also relatively unadorned: they wear a tunic, cloak, and veil, with a diadem across the forehead, and a turban on top of the head underneath the veil.³³ They wear little jewellery – usually just earrings and a trapezoidal brooch, which holds the cloak on the left shoulder. The women also frequently hold a spindle and a distaff in the left hand. Most of the women who display the palm out gesture with their right hand are in this first group (*fig. 1*).

In the second group of portraits, from 150 to 200 CE, the men have grown a beard, and their hair is

27. Colledge 1976, 138, n. 493, Parlasca 1980, 150-51, nn. 17-21; Sadurska and Bounni 1994, 32, cat 31. There are 18 portraits in which this gesture is made. Only one represents a male: Jerusalem, Musée Biblique de Bethesda (Lagrange 1902, 94-97, no. 1; Ingholt 1928 (*PS* 183))

28. Cumont 1926, 72; Corbeill 2004, 23. The gesture, made by both men and women, is also seen in Dura-Europos (Cumont 1926, 41-52, pl. XXXII-XXXVI) and Hatra (Dirven 2008, 229-231; 238) and on Nabataean coins (Kropp 2013, 65, 242-243 fig. 19).

29. Morehart 1956/7, 55-56, figs. 1 and 2.

30. Ingholt 1928.

31. Colledge 1976, 257-261.

32. Ingholt 1954, 7.

33. Ingholt 1954, 8.

thicker and longer. The women are portrayed with much more jewellery: necklaces, bracelets, ring, etc., and there is more variety in the shape of the brooch. The women also adopt a new pose: using the right arm to hold the veil back (*figs. 2 and 3*). In the final group, dating from 200 CE to the destruction of the city in 273 CE, the portraits differ only slightly from those of the second group. The men hold a loop of the cloak in the left hand, and some return to the hairstyles of the first group. Almost without exception, the men are bearded. As opposed to these portraits of the men, which seem to be getting simpler, some of the female portraits in this group become more ornate, with lavish displays of jewellery. The pose of the arms changes as well, with the left arm now raised to catch the veil, or to touch the cheek (*fig. 4*).

Ingholt's groupings facilitate the analysis of change over time, allowing us to trace trends in the portraiture. For women in particular, they reveal the gradual phasing out of both the palm out gesture and the spindle and distaff from the funerary iconography at the end of the second century CE. Keys suspended from the brooch, the "calendar", and the child that is held in the left hand also become uncommon in this same period.³⁴ In other words, by the end of the second century, women no longer held attributes that distinguished them from men, but rather raised one hand to the face or wore increasing amounts of jewellery.

This switch in female iconography at the end of the second century is quite interesting. Colledge explains it by describing the spindle and distaff (as well as the keys and children) as reminders of "domestic drudgery" that were "perhaps not consonant with an age of increasing luxury".³⁵ Anna Sadurska has argued that the shift in attribute from spindle and distaff to jewels signaled the increasing emancipation of

women.³⁶ However, it seems unlikely that this trend towards greater amounts of jewellery reflects an actual change in responsibilities in the domestic sphere. Firstly, attributes such as the spindle and distaff, as discussed earlier, should be considered more symbolic than reflective of actual activities, and secondly, even in the earliest periods those depicted were probably always on the wealthier side and hence, relatively free of "domestic drudgery".³⁷ The reasons for this iconographic change must be sought elsewhere.

Perhaps even more curious than the transition from spindle and distaff to jewellery is the degree to which portraiture of women changes compared to that of men. Male iconography remains fairly stable: they continue to appear in the tunic and cloak, with the arm in the sling throughout the time of production. Priests and men associated with the caravan trade show up in all three periods, holding similar attributes. It would seem that the men undergo cosmetic changes, with the addition of the beard, but, for the most part, retain the same attributes and gestures. Women's attributes change more drastically, with the disappearance altogether of the spindle and distaff, the key, and eventually, the child held on the left arm. The same is true for female gestures, with the palm out gesture falling out of use. In other words, Ingholt's groupings indicate changes in the way that men look; whereas women seem to change in what they do. Female attributes and gestures (palm out) that indicate active contributions to the community disappear. They are replaced by the raising of the hand to the face and the display of jewellery, both of which seem to move away from providing evidence of what these women as individuals contribute to the community. Does this represent an actual change in roles for women in Palmyra from the second to the third centuries? A more likely explanation should see this change in the funerary iconography as evidence of societal priorities shifting to draw more attention to the wealth and strength of the family. Sadurska comes to a similar conclusion when remarking on disappearance of

34. Colledge 1976, 255-261, as demonstrated by a comparison of Group I to Group II to Group III; Ploug 1995, 55, 119; Ploug 1995, 138 (on rarity of keys after 190 CE); Sadurska 1983, 156 (on the disappearance of the so-called calendar).

35. Colledge 1976, 71.

36. Sadurska 1996, 286.

37. See Cussini 2004, 236, n. 7.

these attributes in favour of jewels in the second century:

Bref, il semble qu'après l'an 150 de n.è. les anciennes vertus féminines étaient moins appréciées qu'auparavant. Elles ont été remplacées par le charme et l'élégance, comme si les commerçants enrichis auraient préféré les grandes dames, démontrant par leur allure, la parure et le costume, l'importance de la famille plutôt que les femmes travaillant durement à la maison. A l'époque du développement rapide de la ville et d'enrichissement des grandes familles, le travail domestique était probablement confié à des servantes et ses symboles n'auraient fait honneur ni aux vivantes ni aux défuntes.³⁸

As mentioned previously, it seems unlikely that the shift in iconography reflects an actual change in domestic responsibilities, since the women portrayed in these portraits were probably always among the wealthiest in society. However, the connection between the female adornment and the attention drawn to the family deserves further consideration.

The Significance of Jewels

The increasing amounts of jewellery displayed in these portraits could be a direct reflection of the wealth of the family,³⁹ but such an assumption fails to account for the relative wealth of any family who could afford such portraiture. Are we meant to interpret unadorned female portraits from the late second century as an indication of less advantageous financial circumstances?⁴⁰ It seems unlikely. This equating of jewellery with wealth relies upon an assumption that these portraits are a faithful rendering of the actual jewellery owned by the family, which also seems doubtful. This is not to suggest that the jewellery displayed in these portraits is completely fictitious (the discovery of jewellery in the tombs of the city, how-

ever paltry the amount,⁴¹ does indicate that the women adorned themselves with such items), but rather that the jewels are similar to the spindle and distaff: symbolic rather than factual. In other words, the jewellery worn by these women may have resonated in the community for reasons that go beyond simple displays of wealth.

In the search for a more nuanced understanding of this female adornment, production is one factor that should be considered, since it can inform us about both the accessibility of certain raw materials as well as local social dynamics. There is little evidence of jewellery production in Palmyra in the form of workshops, but this is not unusual. As Catherine Johns explained in discussing the patchy evidence for workshops in Britain: "Some industries leave evidence that is difficult for even the most primitive archaeological methods to miss, for example the firing of pottery; others can be missed extremely easily even by the most sophisticated excavation methods. A goldsmith need not necessarily leave any archaeologically detectable traces".⁴² Despite the absence of evidence for workshops, local production was certainly feasible. Raw materials, in the form of gold, silver, and gemstones could have been imported to the city. Gold and silver would have been fairly easy to obtain because of imperial gold and silver coinage.⁴³ Inscriptural evidence from the city dating to 258 CE mentions a guild of gold and silversmiths.⁴⁴ Gem stones were presumably attainable from the East. Interestingly, luxury goods of the sort that we associate with the caravan trade that travelled through Palmyra, such as precious stones, are not mentioned in the famous Tax Law of Palmyra, dated to 137 CE. The only item from the list that could be considered a luxury product was bronze statues, but we should not expect an entire of cargo of gem stones anyway.⁴⁵ It is reason-

38. Sadurska 1983, 156.

39. Sadurska 1994, 88; D'Ambra 1989, 398.

40. E.g. two examples from Palmyra: Sadurska and Bounni 1994, Cat. 36, fig. 178; Palmyra Museum B 1976/7068 (Sadurska and Bounni 1994, Cat. 84, fig. 179).

41. On jewellery finds from Tomb F, in the Southeast necropolis, see Higuchi and Saito 2001.

42. Johns 1996, 188.

43. Ogden 1992, 30-31.

44. Higgins 1980, 182.

45. On bronze statues, see Matthews 1984, 172.



Fig. 4: Palmyrene funerary portrait, Limestone and paint, 2nd-3rd century CE, Purchase with the Nancy Everett Dwight Fund, Mount Holyoke College Art Museum, South Hadley (Photo: Massachusetts Photograph Petegorsky/Gipe, 1932.4.C.OII).

able to assume that some of the jewellery displayed in the funerary portraiture was crafted locally.

If jewellery is produced locally, local social relations come into play in determining its significance. Although imported items can certainly be used to express local priorities, jewellery that is produced in the community (even when that jewellery imitates foreign styles) enhances the social position of those who display it not only because it highlights the unequal rela-

tionship between consumer and artisan, but also because access to raw materials in the form of gem stones would have distinguished the consumer in the local community, signalling that he enjoyed a prominent position in the local economy or role in caravan trade.⁴⁶

46. On necessity of consumer acquiring raw materials for artisan in antiquity, see Ogden 1992, 27.

Returning to the funerary portraiture, it is likely that the social potency in the local community of the jewellery displayed in these portraits was based on much more than their monetary value. The acquisition, creation, and wearing of jewellery also played a part in the lived experience of Palmyrene community activities; gatherings where unequal access to wealth and trade connections were on display. In an era when Roman hegemony was well established, alluding to a connection to the Romans (by emulating styles of funerary portraiture) might have carried less weight than participation in prominent local activities, such as the caravan trade.⁴⁷ The funerary portraiture therefore simultaneously raised the prestige of the family of the deceased because of its monetary value and its symbolic representation of prominence in communal activities.

The Power of their Presence

Portraits of females also draw attention to the prestige of the family by the mere fact of their presence.⁴⁸ This idea of women contributing to the impression of a strong family is supported by their depiction in the large-scale banquet reliefs that became increasingly

popular in the Palmyrene tomb in late second and early third centuries CE.⁴⁹ These reliefs usually feature a reclining male, who holds a cup or bowl in his left hand. He is surrounded by members of his family, both male and female, either standing behind him or, in the case of his wife or mother, perched on the end of the couch. Additional busts of family members are sometimes placed in the space between the legs of the dining couch below. The significance of this banquet scene in the Palmyrene tomb remains somewhat enigmatic. The obvious interpretation, that a funerary banquet is illustrated, has been questioned by scholars, since food is never represented in the scene.⁵⁰ The banquet motif in general could be a convenient way of representing the family together,⁵¹ but it seems odd that only certain (male) members of the family would hold cups and bowls.⁵²

One possibility is that the recumbent male (or two) who has a central position in these funerary scenes alludes to an activity in which the other family members do not participate.⁵³ In other words, the reclining figure serves as shorthand for another activity, and presumably the reference to participation in a different type of banquet would have been recognizable to a Palmyrene audience. Similar images of reclining males appear on terracotta tesserae that were used to gain entrance to banquets that took place in several of the sanctuaries of Palmyra, most prominently the Sanctuary of Bel.⁵⁴ The pose and dress of the reclining

47. Similar, perhaps, to the phenomenon of villa building in Gaul (particularly outside of southern Gaul) in the first and second centuries CE, which did not automatically contribute to a Roman cultural identity because (among other reasons) most were built “in a period when differences between Gauls and Romans were less marked and less crucial” (Woolf 1998, 156).

48. For a somewhat similar dynamic explaining the presence of female civic portraits in Rome, see Davies 2008, 217: “But generally speaking it is the *absence* of a specific role that is noticeable in these images of women. Accompanying inscriptions and find contexts suggest that many of these women were presented as counterparts and appendages to their menfolk. The statues might be displayed in groups with them, or they were dedicated by them, and these women are commemorated because of their relationship with men. They represent an ideal: a woman who is beautiful and elegant, who shows off the expensive clothing and fancy hairdressing her family can afford for her; she is a woman of leisure who does not meddle in things that are not her concern (that is, men’s public affairs); and she is modest, faithful and chaste.”

49. Ingholt 1970/1; Colledge 1976, 77-78; Heyn 2008, 177, n. 20. 50. Seyrig 1951; Will 1951, 96-98.

51. Ingholt 1970, 182-183; Makowski 1985 116; Sadurska and Bounni 1994, 175.

52. For a more detailed discussion of the significance of these scenes, see Heyn 2008.

53. It should be noted that there are several examples of females reclining. Examples include two small-scale banquet reliefs in the Damascus Museum (DM C.2153 [Colledge 1976, fig. 107]; and DM 18802 [Charles-Gaffiot et al., 2001, 344, pl. 255; Abdul-Hak 1952, 233-235, n.20]) and a relief on the short end of a sarcophagus in the Palmyra Museum courtyard. These reliefs differ from those depicting males because of their (smaller) size and the attributes displayed: none of the women holds a drinking cup.

54. On the tesserae and their find spots, see Seyrig 1940, 52; on

figure in the funerary sphere is probably an allusion to his participation in these religious banquets in the city, presumably an activity that indicated high status in the community.

Once the interpretation of the significance of this group is divorced from an actual banquet, the importance of the familial group is clear. They are not depicted collectively because they are dining together, but rather because it was important to draw attention to the family as a whole: the relief is a testament to its size and strength.⁵⁵ The presence of women in these scenes emphasizes these qualities because of her role as mother as well as the attention drawn to alliances with the family from which she originated.⁵⁶ This interpretation would perhaps explain one man's decision to be depicted with both his deceased and his living wife (and his mother!) in one group.⁵⁷

Conclusion

What does all of this tell us about gender and funerary portraiture in Palmyra? Certain gestures, attributes, and adornment were specific to the genders. In addition, trends in the portraiture move away from drawing attention to active contributions by women and instead focus on attributes that reflect positively on the family as a whole: size, wealth, and prominence in the community. For this reason, funerary portraiture should be used cautiously to draw conclusions about the status of women in Palmyrene society, for example to argue for increasing emancipation of women. This is not to suggest that women's roles did not change in the city.⁵⁸ Epigraphic evidence from the

facades of several tombs does provide some indication of women enjoying greater independence.⁵⁹ Several foundation texts explicitly mention female names among those for whom the tomb was built, and epigraphic records reveal that women could buy and sell portions of the tombs as well as commission reliefs inside the tomb.⁶⁰ In the city itself, women occasionally made and received honorary dedications.⁶¹ However, even in the civic sphere, inscriptional content accompanying statues of women suggests that they appear when it was advantageous to emphasize the strength of the family.⁶² This connection between commemoration of women and the importance of the family reminds us that we must be very careful about the types of evidence that we use to analyse the roles of women in Palmyrene society.

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the religious life of Palmyra, see Kaizer 2002, 165; 221-229.

55. On the significance of the family motif for Republican freedmen in Rome as well as the citizens of Cisalpine Gaul, see George 2005; see also Boatwright 2005 for the importance of family imagery on Pannonian funerary reliefs.

56. See Yon 2002, 174-180, for family alliances through marriage in Palmyra.

57. Banquet scene commissioned in 239 CE by Bôlbarak, son of Moqîmu (Sadurska and Bounni 1994, 142-143).

58. Although it is possible that female roles did not change that much. See comment by Davies (2008, 208) regarding

social roles represented in statues of Roman women: "The range of social roles represented by statues of women appears to be rather more limited: to a large extent, this mirrors their actual role in society as well as the ideal of womanly behaviour (for the elite at least)."

59. Cussini 2004; Cussini 2005; Sadurska 1996, 286.

60. Cussini 2005, 27, 30-39, table 1.

61. Cussini 2005, 28-30; Yon 2002, 166.

62. Yon 2002, 165-167.

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