

Agnes Henning, **Die Turmgräber von Palmyra. Eine lokale Bauform im kaiserzeitlichen Syrien als Ausdruck kultureller Identität.** *Orient-Archäologie*, Band 29. Publisher Marie Leidorf, Rahden 2013. 336 pages, 2 illustrations, 96 plates, several plans, 19 foldout plans.

This book offers a somewhat enlarged version of a doctoral thesis passed in 2001 at the University of Cologne under the supervision of Henner von Hesberg. The author could use the new topographical survey of the site now published by Klaus Schnädelbach (*Topographia Palmyrena 1. Topography. Documents d'archéologie syrienne 18* [Damascus 2010]) and the photogrammetrical documentation of some tombs by a team of the Technical University Berlin.

The necropolis of Palmyra, or rather four separate cemeteries surrounding the ancient city, is certainly the biggest remaining necropolis of the Near East excluding Egypt. Among the varieties of tombs found in Palmyra, the towers are the most conspicuous in the modern landscape and unique in the region. The view of the Valley of Tombs (Wadi al-Qubur), the best-preserved part of the necropolis, is dominated by towers and has struck all visitors, from the early modern travelers to the tourists flocking Palmyra until a

few years ago. In spite of having been freely accessible through centuries, an astonishing number of towers are still standing to a considerable height, and their decoration, whenever present, is well preserved. All graves, however, have been opened and emptied by generations of robbers, while the portraits of the deceased have all disappeared except for some fragments, and today adorn various museums of the world, while their original contexts are irretrievably lost.

Henning has described about one hundred-eighty monuments preserved in different conditions from nearly complete to mere outlines on the ground. Hers is the most complete and thorough treatment of the subject, replacing earlier studies by Carl Watzinger and Karl Wulzinger, Ernest Will and myself (C. Watzinger / K. Wulzinger in: Th. Wiegand, *Palmyra* [Berlin 1932] 44–76; C. Watzinger in: *ibid.* 77–84; E. Will, *La tour funéraire de Palmyre, Syrie* 26, 1949, 87–116; M. Gawlikowski, *Monuments funéraires de Palmyre* [Warsaw 1970]). The introductory chapters are followed by architectural descriptions of the tower tombs, starting with the kinds of stone, masonry, foundations, doors, stairs, loculi, and other elements. Such systematic treatment was applied to these monuments for the first time, and continued with building techniques, architectural decoration of different parts, and finally the sites of sculpture and painting as preserved in some towers. This part of the book is essentially descriptive (pp. 27–84). Just one point is speculative: the roofing. Henning rightly rejects earlier suggestions of pyramids or rows of merlons crowning the tops of the towers, and argues for flat roofs accessible through the omnipresent staircase, while the higher courses of masonry taper above a cornice, preserved or restored on some tombs (p. 36 pl. 2). This then suggests, in the author's mind, ceremonies held on the roof. This is possible, but there is no evidence.

The little we can say about the beliefs and practices related to the dead shows that they were, not surprisingly, the same whether in towers or in other forms of tombs (hypogea and so-called funerary temples). Save two or three cases of incineration (not concerning the towers) the corpses were laid to rest wrapped in textiles soaked in balms and resins, thus outlasting in the stable and dry conditions prevailing in towers, while containers for precious liquids, mostly made of glass, are found normally in underground tombs. The only intact tomb in a tower was discovered in the Atenatan monument, but rags from robbed burials abounded in other tower tombs. Frankincense or other aromata had been burned in round trays installed in front of some graves, though how far this can be taken as a cult practice is a moot point.

The decoration in some towers, sculpted or painted, contains Dionysiac motifs and figures of Nike, expressing some form of belief in salvation. Common, on the other hand, were funerary busts sealing loculi burials and family banquet scenes which I believe (with Henri Seyrig) to recall the social position

in real life rather than a blessed afterlife (*Le repas des morts et le »banquet funèbre«* à Palmyre. *Ann. arch. arabes syriennes. Rev. d'arch. et d'hist.* 1, 1951, 1–11 = *Scripta varia* [Paris 1985] 323–331). For the first time a collection of sculptural fragments recovered from the Elahbel tower tomb is published in this book (pp. 66–73 and pl. 20–27).

The development of tower tombs from lofty monuments containing only a staircase, raising over a basement with loculi opening to the outside, to multi-storey buildings ready to receive hundreds of burials does not only mirror a progress in the art of architecture but also the social change from a peripheral oasis to an opulent caravan city, home to large clans proud of their lineage and rich enough to indulge in the fastidious memorials meant to be »houses of eternity« and »monuments of honour« to many generations. When they ceased to be built during the first half of the second century (the most recent tower dated was built in A. D. 128), it was only to be replaced by even more lavish funerary temples, expressing the growing assimilation of Graeco-Roman models and plastic forms, but keeping the local flavour about them (cf. A. Schmidt-Colinet, *Das Tempelgrab Nr. 36 in Palmyra* [Mayence 1992]). In the beginning, however, I still believe these tombs evolved from upright stone monuments called »naphsha« or »soul«, raised over tombs to embody, no doubt increasingly symbolically, the presence of the departed.

One of the book's merits is to present in parallel other Syrian tower tombs, much less known and seldom visited. They are to be found in the Euphrates valley, between Qalaat Jaber and the Iraqi border. The author could visit them all, providing photographs and schematic plans wherever possible (pp. 101–113, pl. 82–92). They present outer loculi and a winding staircase, some of them also chambers with a few niches inside. These traits make them similar and contemporary to the earliest Palmyra towers of the first centuries B. C. and A. D., but they differ by frequent stucco columns, as common in Mesopotamian architecture of the age. I see no reason to date the towers of Halabiye in the late third century (p. 113), just because the ancient name of the place, Zenobia, refers to the famous queen. The city ruins are only Justinianic, and whereas there had been an earlier settlement, the connection to Zenobia is limited to the name. It seems more advisable to consider the tower tombs of Halabiye as contemporary to, or only slightly later than other Middle Euphrates towers. Some of these monuments could have provided the original inspiration to the earliest Palmyra towers, though the later developments in Palmyra were independent and limited to this site.

There is no reason to include in the comparative part some buildings from the Hauran (pp. 114 f.). As Annie Sartre-Fauriat has shown, these towers have never contained any funerary installations and should rather be seen as field watchtowers. The Hauranese

tombs are quite different, and as some of them present several storeys, that is because they received, later, in Christian times, pigeon-homes above earlier tombs still in use (Des tombeaux et des morts [Beirut 2001] vol. I, 130–134; 140–145). In my opinion they have no relation to Palmyra.

On the other hand, it would be good to include another Euphrates tower tomb in today's Turkey: the tomb of Amashamash in Serrin, long since known (H. J. W. Drijvers / J. F. Healey, *The Old Syriac Inscriptions of Edessa and Osrhoene* [Leiden-Boston-Cologne 1999] 157 [with earlier literature] and pl. 46). Doubtful remains the case of the oldest known Syrian inscription in Birecik (Birtha, A. D. 6), which was re-used in a tower of the Ottoman castle (A. Maricq, *La plus ancienne inscription syriaque. Celle de Birecik, Syrie* 39, 1962, 88–100 [88–90]). Whether the tower

goes back to Antiquity or not has never been investigated.

The catalogue of all extant tower tombs (pp. 137–292) contains detailed descriptions clearly presented according to the same scheme, also mentioning scattered finds, comparanda, dating (epigraphic or typological), and literature. Most of them are provided with sketch plans supplemented by many photographs (pl. 28–83) and photogrammetric renderings of the best-preserved monuments. This tool shall not and needs not to be replaced in the foreseeable future.

To sum up, Agnes Henning presents a complete up-to-date treatment of the peculiar phenomenon of the Palmyrene tower tombs. It shall remain the principal reference to the subject for a long time.

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