

## The Caravan Families of Palmyra: Prosopographical Evidence of Elite Involvement in Long Distance Commerce

Eivind Heldaas Seland

**Abstract:** The role and involvement of the Palmyrene elite in the organization of the famous caravan trade of the ancient city has been a long-standing historiographical issue. Prosopographical evidence allows us to trace the family connections of several the caravan leaders mentioned in Palmyrene inscriptions and thus to situate them in their social milieu. While it has been well known that some of the caravan leaders were also individuals of considerable civic and military standing, the results of the present study indicate that many of the otherwise unattested individuals engaged in the organization and operation of long-distance trade involved in caravan trade also belonged to a set of Palmyrene elite families. It is suggested that families were important organizational units in Palmyrene commerce, that commercial activities were not detrimental to social status within the Palmyrene elite, and that income from trade was a vehicle of social mobility in ancient Palmyra.

### Introduction

Palmyra is located in the Syrian Desert, at an oasis which was important to the pastoral population of the region due to the perennial presence of abundant water, and the extensive seasonal salt-flats south of the city. The city was situated along the most convenient route between Damascus and Homs in western Syria and the Euphrates to the east, with regard to water and topography, and in a favorable spot for anyone moving from the desert towards the agricultural regions to the northwest.<sup>1</sup>

The oasis has been settled since the Neolithic,<sup>2</sup> but it was never a place of more than regional importance until the Roman period. A number of scholars suggest that what was a village throughout most of the year, and likely doubled as a place for market-fairs and common religious cult during the summer when the nomads had their flocks in the region, became the focus of a larger, more permanent settlement and political unit in the final period of the Seleucid Empire, when semi-nomadic groups formed polities on the desert fringe, including in addition to Palmyra also the Nabataean, Ituraean, Emesean, and Osroenean polities.<sup>3</sup>

During the first two centuries AD Palmyra grew into a city of perhaps 30,000–40,000 inhabitants.<sup>4</sup> A substantial, but unknown segment of the population will have continued to reside in the hinterland, permanently or for parts of the year, subsisting to a large degree on animal-products.<sup>5</sup> In the third century Palmyra experienced three parallel and interrelated processes. In the city one of the elite families

---

1 Seland (2024).

2 Cremaschi / Zerboni (2016).

3 Sartre (2005), 12–25, 32–14; Sommer (2018), 66, 157; Gawlikowski (2021), 21–22.

4 Hammad (2010); Campmany Jiménez et al. (2022); Gawlikowski (2021); Raja (2022).

5 Meyer (2017).

managed to monopolize power and assume status of royalty. In the Near East, Palmyra achieved regional hegemony in the years following the capture of Valerian at the hands of the Sassanians in 263 AD, and, in 270–272 AD, Palmyra's ruler, Zenobia, made an attempt at imperial power on behalf of her minor son, Vaballathus. All three trajectories came to an abrupt end with the Roman capture of the city, 272 AD, and its sack following an unsuccessful rebellion in the year after.<sup>6</sup>

There is little controversy that a substantial part of Palmyra's prosperity should be ascribed to the city's key role in the long-distance commerce between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean.<sup>7</sup> As with the city itself, the origins of Palmyrene long-distance trade are not securely known, but by the turn of the Common Era Palmyrenes were operating caravans between Babylonia and Syria. A few decades later they were present in Southern Mesopotamia, and soon they were active in maritime trade in the Persian Gulf. By the second century AD Palmyrene merchants were operating as far south and east as the Indo-Parthian Kingdom on the Indus Plain. By the end of the second century there were Palmyrene shipowners in Egypt, and in the third century Palmyrenes dedicated inscriptions in Southern Arabia and on the Indian Ocean island of Socotra.<sup>8</sup>

Less agreement exists on two interrelated issues about the organization of Palmyrene caravan trade and the nature of the Palmyrene polity. The first pertains to who funded, protected, carried through and profited from the caravans. The second concerns the status of these people in Palmyrene society. Were they rich, politically influential, well respected? These discussions echo two wider debates within ancient history. One originates with Max Weber and his model of the ancient city as a consumer city.<sup>9</sup> Were city elites landowners living off rents, as Weber assumed was the pattern in most ancient cities? Or were they merchants and producers, as increasingly became the case in the late medieval and early modern period? The other debate is the modernism-primitivism or formalism-substantivism controversy about the nature of ancient economies: Can they be studied with the same tools as modern market economies, or were they different in the sense that economic actions were to a much larger degree embedded in social and political relations? Were Palmyrene merchants part of the city's elite or were they socially marginalized?<sup>10</sup>

With regard to Palmyra these debates have rarely been addressed explicitly, but the modernist/formalist/producer-city position was reflected in the notion first advanced by Theodor Mommsen and Mikhail Rostovtzeff that Palmyra was a city ruled by an aristocracy of so-called 'merchant princes', with explicit parallels to the Late Medieval cities of Northern Italy, Germany and the Netherlands, where merchants dominated city councils, and cities maintained extraterritorial trading stations, so called factories, in foreign territories.<sup>11</sup> A substantivist/primitivist/consumer city model was first advanced by the French classicist Ernest Will. He realized that the people who were honored in the Palmyrene caravan inscriptions (see below) were not the merchants themselves, but rather powerful individuals who had assisted them in various ways. Will saw these patrons as traditional, land-owning elites, who were able to mobilize animals, guards, handlers, and, in some cases, money towards the completion of a caravan expedition, and that this took place as acts of euergetism, that is of public benevolence, rather than as direct economic investments.<sup>12</sup> Thus, for Will, the caravans were embedded in the socio-political matrix of Palmyra. The merchants Will considered to be commercial experts

---

6 Andrade (2018); Hartmann (2001).

7 Teixidor (1984); Drexhage (1988); Seland (2016).

8 Cf. Seland (2016), 75–88.

9 Weber (1921).

10 Cf. Manning (2018), 17–71.

11 Mommsen (1904), 428–429; Rostovtzeff (1932a).

12 Will (1957).

of modest political and social standing, and the caravan leaders attested in the inscriptions he saw as technical experts and mid-tier managers rather than parts of the urban elite.

Subsequent scholarship has largely sought to reconcile Will's insight that the persons honored in the inscriptions were rarely merchants, with the realization that there certainly were caravan leaders who were also men of considerable social status and economic means, that trade does appear to have been of vital importance to the city, and that it is hard to explain the prominence, scale and longevity of Palmyrene trade without elite endorsement, involvement, and investment.<sup>13</sup> Most studies have focused on the civic, religious, military, and tribal status of the people shown public respect in the caravan inscriptions, but the problem pointed out by Will remains, viz. that these individuals were not honored for their commercial activities, but for their civic acts of support towards the caravans. This article turns instead to the people who are mentioned in the inscriptions as leaders or members of the caravans that received help. As argued below, Palmyrene caravan leaders were not the subordinate commercial and logistical experts envisioned by Will. Rather they were tightly integrated in the Palmyrene elite. They held prestigious civic and religious offices and were closely related to other such office holders. Some of them served as caravan leaders on several occasions, and certain families were involved in caravan trade over several generations. The people they honored with inscriptions and statues were not their superiors, but their peers. Past commentators have also emphasized the role of families in Palmyrene caravan trade,<sup>14</sup> but this is the first study to systematically investigate the issue. Arguably it offers a way to resolve the debate on the role of the Palmyrene elite in the city's long-distance trade. In a certain manner the Palmyrene elite were indeed 'merchant princes' in the sense that political elites were deeply involved in the operation of caravan trade. But this was only one of their diverse sources of authority, reinforcing the impression that commercial activities were deeply embedded in the socio-political matrix of the Syrian desert-city.

## Method

In most cases we know little more than the name of these individuals and the fact that they served as caravan leaders or traveled with a caravan in a certain year. Here, however, the Palmyrene epigraphic habit, with its preoccupation with patrilinear genealogies, comes to our help. Caravan members figuring in the inscriptions are mentioned with up to five ancestors and in some cases their family or tribe. This allows us to trace the prosopographical networks of the people traveling with Palmyrene caravans, and in some cases to identify them with documented funerary monuments. Prosopography, with its emphasis on common characteristics within a group,<sup>15</sup> seems well adapted to reveal more about these individuals, who on first sight appear unexceptional compared to their more illustrious compatriots honored in the inscriptions.

Our main source of information about Palmyrene caravan trade is a group of c. 35 inscriptions.<sup>16</sup> The number is approximate because strictly speaking, some of the texts deal with related matters such as diplomacy, taxation, and expatriate communities, rather than caravans. Most texts are bilinguals, Greek and Aramaic, but some have only been preserved in Aramaic. They were prominently displayed in public spaces in Palmyra, including in the Agora, several sanctuaries, and the colonnaded street. When the inscriptions were set up, they were accompanied by bronze statues, none of which are preserved. Typical texts honor a named male individual for his services towards a caravan. These services are sometimes unspecified, in other cases economic assistance, military protection or diplomatic inter-

13 E.g. Andrade (2013); Gregoratti (2015); (2020); Sommer (2018); Seland (2014); (2016); Yon (2002); Young (2001).

14 Gregoratti (2015); Yon (1998).

15 Verboven / Carlier / Dumolyn (2007).

16 Drexhage (1988); Fox / Lieu (n.d.); Gawlikowski (1994); Yon (2002), 263–264.

vention are mentioned. The texts also frequently mention caravan leaders, who are the group of interest in this study. These are usually not mentioned because of their service, but as sponsors of the inscription or simply in order to identify the caravan.

The c. 3,200 known Palmyrene inscriptions are gathered in the corpora of *Palmyrene Aramaic Texts* (PAT) and *Inscriptions Greques et Latines de la Syrie* (IGLS). For the current purpose the specialized *Inscriptiones palmyrenae selectae ad commercium pertinentes* (IPSCP) has been particularly useful in collecting most of the relevant texts. The present study utilizes earlier work to shed new light on a historical problem. This was only possible thanks to the prosopography of c. 6,000 names organized into 606 genealogies based on the texts then available by Palmira Piersimoni,<sup>17</sup> and greatly helped by Jean-Baptist Yon's comprehensive 2002-study of the Palmyrene elite.<sup>18</sup> A new, digital database with somewhat different scope is currently being developed by the *Prosopographia Palmyrena* project (von Danckelman, this volume), but has not been utilized here. It will surely enable better understanding of the socio-political embeddedness of Palmyrene caravan trade in the future.

Based on the texts collected in IPSCP with the addition of a single inscription not included there,<sup>19</sup> 22 Palmyrene individuals were identified on the basis that they either served as caravan leaders (Aramaic: *rb šyrt'*, Greek: συνδιάρχης and variants) or actually and personally are said to have traveled, e.g. 'go up'/'go/come down' (*slq/nht*, ἀναβαίνω/κατελθόντες) with the caravan (tab. 1). This distinguishes them from the group of caravan patrons discussed in most scholarship on the subject, who are honored for their services to the caravan, but not for leading it, and who are not said to have traveled with it. Thus, illustrious Palmyrenes like Soados, son of Boliades, celebrated in a number of inscriptions between 132 and 145 AD,<sup>20</sup> and Septimius Worod,<sup>21</sup> one of the most powerful individuals next to the royal family during the final decades of the Palmyrene polity, have not been included. Soades and Worod certainly assisted Palmyrene caravans, but, although they might have, there is no evidence that they themselves led or traveled with them. Most of the individuals are simply mentioned in the inscriptions in order to identify the caravan that sponsored the text, but some (seven) were receiving honors from a caravan or from the city for their leadership. This partial overlap between caravan leaders and caravan patrons is already well established and has received considerable scholarly attention.<sup>22</sup> A single person who is not explicitly said to have headed or traveled with a caravan was also included: Ḥaddudan b. Ḥaddudan Firmôn (ID14). Ḥaddudan dedicated an inscription in Palmyrene<sup>23</sup> in 159 AD honoring Marcus Ulpius Yarḥai, son of Ḥairan Abgar (ID11), for help he received in Spasinou Charax, an important Palmyrene destination at the head of the Persian Gulf. This year Abgar, the son of Marcus (ID13), led a caravan from Spasinou Charax, and it is assumed that Ḥaddudan's participation in this caravan is the context for the assistance he received. Then 17 of these individuals were identified in 12 of Piersimoni's genealogies, enabling us to consider their position in Palmyrene society. Apart from their ID in the table below, individuals and their families are also identified with their IDs in Piersimoni's prosopography.

---

17 Piersimoni (1995).

18 Piersimoni (1995); Yon (2002).

19 PAT 0274.

20 See Andrade (2012); Gregoratti (2021); Yon (2002), 99–130.

21 E.g. PAT 0288.

22 Andrade (2013); Gregoratti (2015); Sommer (2018); Yon (2002).

23 IPSCP G 22

ID	Inscription	Name and patronyms	Year AD	Piersimoni (family, person)	Action/office
1	IPSPC G14 / PAT 0197	ḤGGW YRḤBWL Ἀγεργος Ἰαριβωλεους	132	–	Synodiarchês
2	IPSPC G14 / PAT 0197	TYMRŠW TYMRŠW Θαιμαρσος τοῦ Θαιμαρσου		–	Synodiarchês
3	IPSPC G8 / PAT1397	MRQS 'LPYS 'BGR ḤYRN 'BGR Μάρκος Οὐλπιος Ἀβγαρος Αἰρανου	135	129 Abgar, 'BGR3	Travelled with
4	IPSPC G10 / PAT1412	MLKW 'ZYZW Μαλχος τοῦ Αἰζειζου	140	–	Travelled with
5	IPSPC G12 / PAT0262	NS' ḤL' NS' ḤL' RP'L 'BSY Νεση̄ς Ἀλᾱ τοῦ Νεση̄ τοῦ Ἀλᾱ τοῦ Ῥεφαέλου τοῦ Ἀβισσέου	142	52 Abissai, NŠ'8	Synodiarchês
5	IPSPC G13 / PAT 1419	NŠ' ḤL' NŠ' ḤL' Νεση̄ς Ἀλᾱ τοῦ Νεση̄ τοῦ Ἀλᾱ	150	52 Abissai, NŠ'8	Travelled with
6	IPSPC G15 / JSS4	ML' ŠM'WN Μαλη̄ς Συμῶνου	144	–	Synodiarchês
7	IPSPC G15 / JSS4	ḤNBL ŠM'WN BZQ' Ἐννιβήλος Συμῶνου τοῦ Βαζέκη	144	–	Synodiarchês
8	PAT0274	ZBD'TH ZBDL' YDY Ζαβδεάθος Ζαβδελᾱ τοῦ Ἰαδδαίου	155	234 Yaddai, ZBD'TH8	Synodiarchês
9	IPSPC G18 / PAT0306	ḤYRN YRḤY TYM' Name not given in Greek version	157	77 Annubat, ḤYRN6	Travelled with
10	IPSPC G18 / PAT0306	ḤBYBY YRḤY ḤYRN Name not given in Greek version	157	77 Annubat, ḤBYBY7	Travelled with
11	IPSPC G18 / PAT0306	MRQS 'LPYS YRḤY ḤYRN 'BGR Μάρκων Οὐλπιον Ἰαραῖον Αἰράνου τοῦ Ἀβγάρου	157	129 Abgar, YRḤY4	Travelled with
11	IPSPC G23 / PAT0307	MRQS 'LPYS YRḤY ḤYRN 'BGR	150–160	129 Abgar, YRḤY4	Travelled with

		No Greek version of text			
12	IPSPC G19 / PAT1399	YDY ZBDLH YDY Ιαδδαιος Ζαβδιλα τοῦ Ιαδδαιου	157	234 Yaddai, YDY7	Synodiarchês
13	IPSPC G21 / PAT1409	ʾBGR (MRQS ʾLPYS YRḤY) ḤYRN ʾBGR Ἀβγαρος (Μάρκου Οὐλπίου Ἰαραιου Αἰρανου) τοῦ Ἀβγαρου	159	129 Abgar, ʾBGR5	Travelled with
14	IPSPC G22 / PAT1395	ḤDWDN ḤDWDN PRMWN No Greek version of text	159	11 Firmôn, ḤDWDN8	Received help Karka Maišan
15	IPSPC G25 / PAT1373	NŠʾ BLYDʿ Νεσῆς Βωλιάδους	161/ 163	232 Taimšamš, NŠʾ6	Synodiarchês
16	IPSPC G27 / PAT0309	TYMRŠW LŠMŠ MLKW ʾBY No Greek version of text	100– 150	44 Aʿabi, TYMRŠW15	Travelled with
17	IPSPC G28 / PAT0294	TYMRŠW TYMʾ MQYMW GRBʾ Θαιμαρσας Θαιμη τοῦ Μοκίμου τοῦ Γαρβᾶ	193	65 Garba, TYMRŠW4	Synodiarchês
18	IPSPC G29 / PAT1378	ʿGYLW MQY ʿGYLW ŠWYRʾ Ογηλος Μακκαίου τοῦ Ογηλου τοῦ Αγεγουτοῦ Σεουιρα	199	60 Sewira, ʿGYLW14	Synodiarchês
19	IPSPC G30 / PAT0295	[YDY] TYMRŠW TYMʾ MQYMW [GRBʾ] Ιαδδαιος Θαιμαρσα τοῦ Θαιμη τοῦ Μοκιμου τοῦ Γαρβα	211	65 Garba, YDY6	Travelled with
20	IPSPC G31 / PAT0276	YWLYS ʿWRLYS ZBYDʾ MQYMW ZBYDʾ ʿŠTWR BYDʾ Ιούλιος Αὐρήλιος Ζεβειδας Μοκιμου τοῦ Ζεβειδου τοῦ Ασθωρου Βαιδα	247	97 Baida, ZBYDʾ 11	Travelled with
21	IPSPC G32 / PAT0282	YWLYS ʾWRLYS ŠLMLT MLʾ ʾBDY Ἰούλιος Αὐρήλιος Σαλαμαλλαθος Μαλη τοῦ Ἀβδαιου	257/ 258	287 ʾAbdai, ŠLMLT3	Synodiarchês
22	IPSPC G33 / PAT1360	YWLYS ʾWRLYS NBWMY TYMŠMŠ BWNʾ ŠBY	Post 211	13 Baʿâ,	Synodiarchês

		Ἰούλιον Αὐρήλιον Νεβουμαῖον Θαιμισαμοῦ τοῦ Βωννεοῦς Σαβει		NBWMY35	
--	--	---	--	---------	--

Tab. 1: Identified and presumed Palmyrene caravan leaders and co-travellers.

## Results

Before assessing the position of Palmyrene caravan leaders in their prosopographical networks, some observations can be made on basis of the list of individuals alone:

- It was possible to serve as caravan leader more than once. Nešâ, son of Ḥalâ (ID5), led caravans in 142 and 150 AD. ‘Ogēlu, son of Maqqai (ID18), is honored for leading caravans multiple times.
- The instances may be several years apart, and others might serve as caravan leaders in the intervening years. Malâ and Ḥanibâl, sons of Šim‘on (ID6,7), 144 AD, thus serve between the documented terms of Nešâ.
- The example of Malâ and Ḥanibâl moreover demonstrates that there might be more than one caravan leader for a single caravan and that these could be brothers.
- Likely there could be more than one caravan in a single year. In 157 AD inscriptions mention caravans from Choumana (probably near Babylon<sup>24</sup>) and Spasinou Charax.<sup>25</sup>

## Abgar Family

One of the most prominent caravan families of mid-second century Palmyra was the Abgar family of the Roman Sergia tribe.<sup>26</sup> Marcus Ulpius Yarḥai (ID11) is mentioned in a series of inscriptions from the 150s AD, making him one of the most celebrated caravan patrons. He is also lauded for his patriotism (Φιλοπάτρις).<sup>27</sup> In most cases he holds the role of a caravan patron, not said to travel or lead himself, but on two occasions he is reported to have accompanied merchants going to Palmyra from Choumana and Selukia.<sup>28</sup> Although Yarḥai is the most famous member of this family, his brother Abgar (ID3) led a caravan from Spasinou Charax to Palmyra in 135 AD, and his son, also named Abgar (ID13) served as *synodiarch* in 159 AD. The *nomen* Ulpius shows that the family received their Roman citizenship during the rule of Trajan (98–117 AD). This was rare in Palmyra and marks them as a part of the city’s absolute elite already at that point.<sup>29</sup>

24 Seland (2016), 39.

25 IPSPC G18 and G19.

26 Piersimoni (1995), 129, 654; Yon (2012), 142; fig. 1.

27 PAT 1403, 2763.

28 IPSPC G18, G23.

29 Sommer (2018), 121.



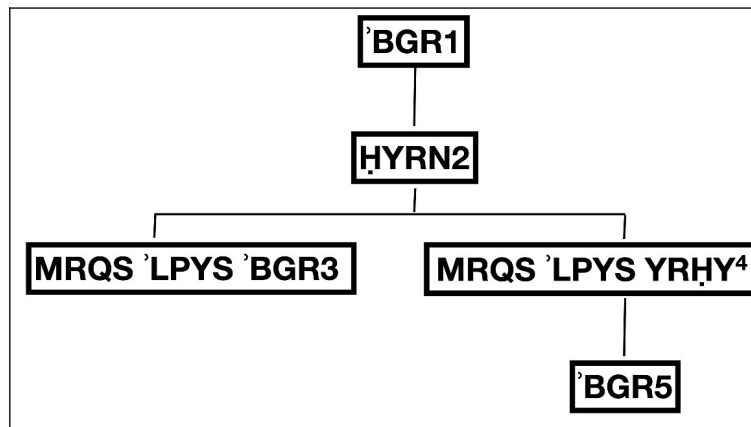


Fig. 1: Family tree of the Abgar family, Sergia tribe.

### Firmôn Family

Among the most longstanding families of Palmyra were the Firmôn family (fig. 2), documented across eight generations.<sup>30</sup> Their scion Ḥaddudan (ID14 / ḤDWDN8) received help from Marcus Ulpius Yarḥai (ID11) when the former was in Spasinou Charax, 159 AD,<sup>31</sup> presumably as part of the caravan lead by the latter's son Abgar (ID13). The Firmôn family apparently belonged to the Palmyrene elite for most of the city's documented history, although the earliest generations can only be reconstructed on grounds of genealogies given in the funerary inscriptions.<sup>32</sup> Firmôn, the name of the eponymous ancestor, is held to be of Iranian origin,<sup>33</sup> indicating a rare case of geographical mobility in the early phase of Palmyrene history. Apart from Ḥaddudan, notable family members included his brother Yarḥibôlâ (YRḤBWL'9), who on evidence of a banqueting *tessera* seems to have held the position of *symposiarch* or the college of priests in the sanctuary of Bel,<sup>34</sup> the top religious office in Palmyra. Their cousin, also named Ḥaddudan (ḤDWDN12), purchased eight niches for his family in the famous Tomb of the Three Brothers 160 AD.<sup>35</sup> The latter Ḥaddudan's brother, Abgar ('BGR13), traveled with the *strategos* Yarḥai in the desert east of Palmyra.<sup>36</sup> 'Awîdâ ('WYD'17), the grandson of the latter Ḥaddudan, was honored by the council of Palmyra together with his cousin Yarḥibôlâ (YRḤBWL'19), in 175 AD for providing bronze doors for the sanctuary of Bel,<sup>37</sup> while his sister Tomallakis (TLMK18) contributed 2,500 denarii towards the restoration of the bath of Aglibôlos and Malachibêlos, 182 AD.<sup>38</sup> The activities of the Firmôn family, especially generations 5–7 active in the latter half of the second century AD, are thus visible in many spheres and on the very top level of Palmyrene society: Trade, religion, military activity, and euergetism. Ḥaddudan's presence in Spasinou Charax, 159 AD, is a clear indication that some of the family's wealth stemmed from commercial activities.

30 Piersimoni (1995), 11, 563.

31 IPSPC G22 / PAT 1395.

32 Brughmans et al. (2021).

33 Piersimoni (1995), 11, 563; Yon (2012), 260, 262.

34 RTP 35; Milik (1972), 237.

35 PAT 0523.

36 PAT 2810.

37 IGLS 17.21.

38 PAT 1397.



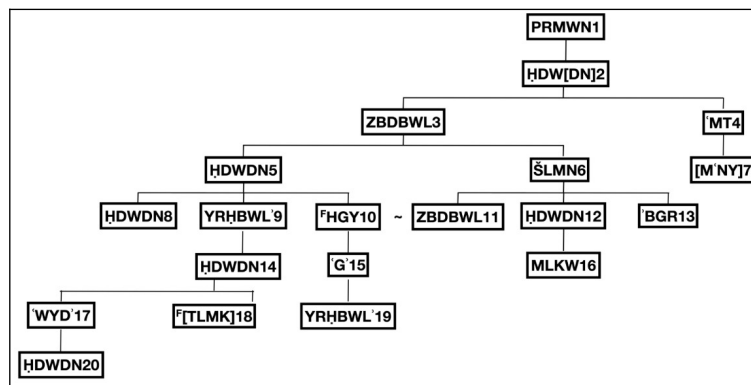


Fig. 2: Family tree of the Firmôn family, Sergia tribe.

## Baidâ Family

The Baidâ family (fig. 3) is attested across six generations,<sup>39</sup> the final of which is of interest here. Julius Aurelius Zebeidas (ID20 / ZBYD'11) was honored by the members of a caravan he had accompanied to Vologesias in 247 AD.<sup>40</sup> His namesake and brother (ZBYD'10) bought tomb 150, the so-called Marôna tomb, named after its founder Julius Aureus Marôna, at an unknown date.<sup>41</sup> This is significant not only because the purchase of an entire house-tomb signifies considerable wealth, but also because the Marôna tomb was the find-spot of the famous relief depicting a man standing between a ship and a camel (fig. 4), being a rare depiction of commercial involvement in Palmyrene art.<sup>42</sup> Their cousin Bar'athe (BR'TH12) was honored by the people and the council of Palmyra at an uncertain date because 'he loved his city' (*rhym mdyth*).<sup>43</sup> In sum this shows the direct involvement in the operation of caravan trade by a family belonging to the utmost elite of Palmyrene society in the mid third century AD.

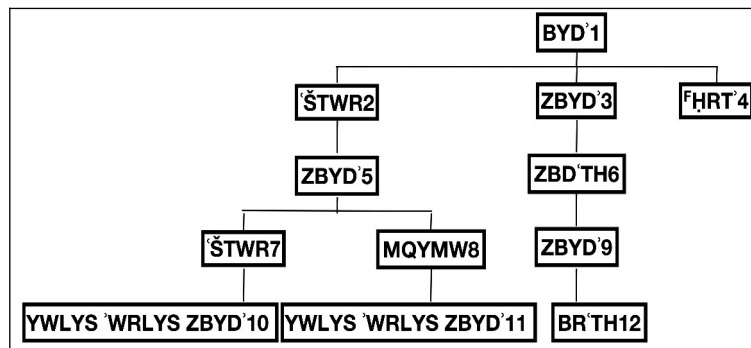


Fig. 3: Family tree of the Baidâ family.

39 Piersimoni (1995), 97, 636; fig. 3.

40 IPSPC G31 / PAT 0276.

41 Gawlikowski (1970), 146; PAT 0565.

42 Seland (2017).

43 PAT 1359.



**Fig. 4: The ship relief from the Marôna/Baidâ family tomb (Palmyra Museum A24/1226; Photographer: Jørgen Christian Meyer).**

### Taimšamš Family

The Taimšamš family (fig. 5)<sup>44</sup> is notable because it was the family of the single individual that received the most civic honors for his benevolence towards the caravans according to the Palmyrene epigraphic record, Soados, son of Bôliades.<sup>45</sup> Soados (S'DW5) was active in the 130s and 140s AD. In 132 AD he was honored by the people and council with four statues in sanctuaries of Palmyra and an edict from the Roman Governor of Syria, Publius Marcellus.<sup>46</sup> In 144 AD he received further four statues in gratitude for leading military action against robbers threatening a caravan from Vologesias,<sup>47</sup> and in 145/146 AD another four statues were dedicated in gratitude of his many services to Palmyrene merchants, citizens and caravans in Vologesias. He is also said to have been honored by emperor Hadrian and his son Antoninus and to have established a temple of the Roman emperors in Vologesias.<sup>48</sup> It is notable, however, that Soados is never mentioned holding the office of caravan leader or honored for traveling with the caravans.<sup>49</sup> He is thus the prime example of a caravan patron as a role distinct from that of a caravan leader.<sup>50</sup> When situating Soados within his family, it nevertheless becomes clear that he hardly kept arm's length to commercial activities. Indeed we have to look no further than to his brother, Neša (NŠ'6, ID15), who served as *synodiarch* of a caravan returning from Spasinou Charax in 161 or 163 AD.<sup>51</sup> That the family was well established as part of the Palmyrene

<sup>44</sup> Piersimoni (1995), 232, 637.

<sup>45</sup> Andrade (2012); Gregoratti (2015), 57.

<sup>46</sup> PAT 0197.

<sup>47</sup> IPSPC G15.

<sup>48</sup> PAT 1062.

<sup>49</sup> Yon (2002), 110–111.

<sup>50</sup> Young (2001), 135–136, Will (1957).

<sup>51</sup> IPSPC G25 / PAT1373.

elite already before the generation of Soados and Neša is revealed by an inscription stating that their uncle Zebaida (ZBYD'3) held the top religious office of *symposiarch* in 117 AD.<sup>52</sup>

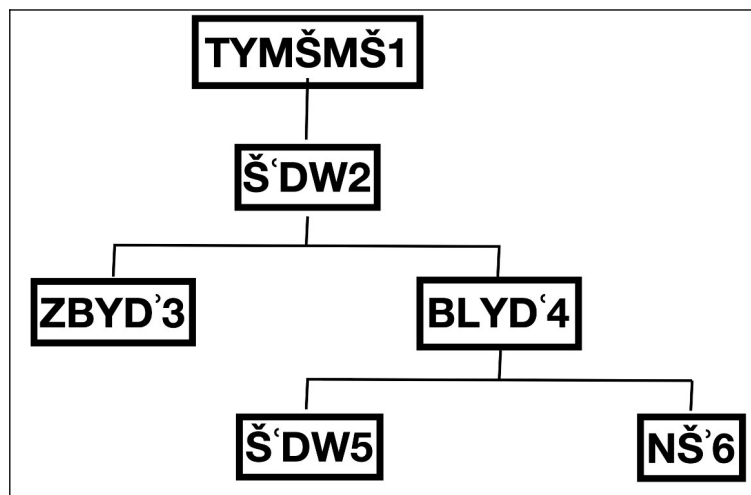


Fig. 5: Family tree of the Taimšamš family.

### Garbâ Family

Less famous, but no less interesting is the Garbâ family (fig. 6),<sup>53</sup> documented across a respectable seven generations spanning from the first until the third century AD. In 193 AD Taimaršû, son of Taimê (ID17 / TYMRŠW4), was honored by the caravan he had traveled with from Spasinou Charax for his financial assistance of 300 gold *denarii*. In the Aramaic version he is explicitly mentioned as caravan leader.<sup>54</sup> In the same inscription his sons Yaddai and Zabdibôl are honored in capacity of being his sons. Yaddai is very likely identical with ID19 / YDY6, who was honored by the merchants who traveled in the caravan he headed to Vologesias 211 AD.<sup>55</sup> The Garbâs were thus involved in the operation of caravan trade over at least two generations, the sons traveling with their father before one of them would later assume the responsibility of caravan leader in his own right. That the family's standing in Palmyrene society did not rest on caravan trade alone is indicated by an inscription dedicated by the people and council 158 AD, honoring Taimaršû's brother Zebîdâ for unspecified services.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>52</sup> PAT 0265.

<sup>53</sup> Piersimoni (1995), 65, 608.

<sup>54</sup> IPSPC G28 / PAT 0294.

<sup>55</sup> IPSPC G30 / PAT 0295.

<sup>56</sup> IGLS 17.1.73.

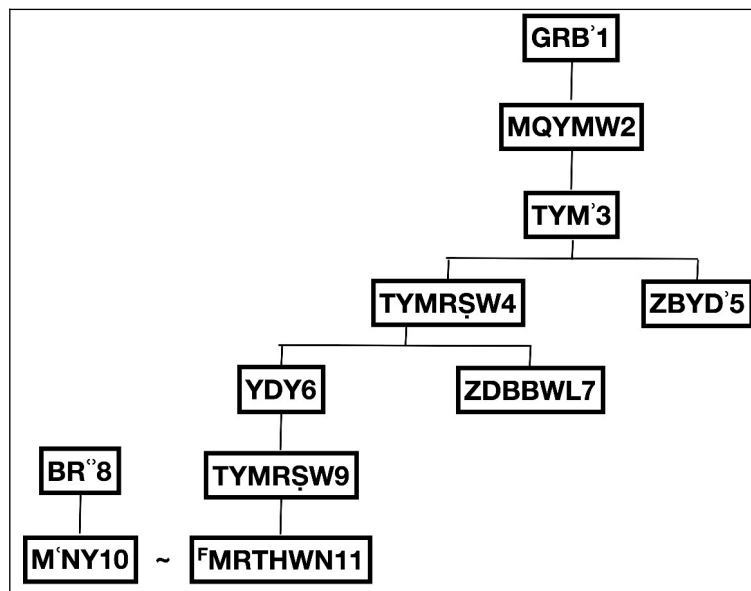


Fig. 6: Family tree of the Garbâ family.

### A'abî Family

An example of a family belonging to the utmost civic and religious elite of Palmyra, but nevertheless having members involved in the direct operation of caravan trade is the A'abî family (fig. 7).<sup>57</sup> Yarhibôlâ (YRHBWL'12) appears in several texts. He constructed a temple to Baal Hamon at Jebel Muntar on the outskirts of Palmyra in 89 AD along with two others, he served as *symposiarch* (head priest), and he was *synedros* (president) of the council.<sup>58</sup> His son Šalman is attested as *symposiarch* on two *tesserae*.<sup>59</sup> In later generations, Yarhibôlâ's grand-nephew Mezabbana (MZBN'22) also served as a priest.<sup>60</sup> Yarhibôlâ's nephew Yarhibôlâ (YRHBWL'16) is famous in Palmyrene historiography for conducting an embassy to the kingdom of Elymais, on the coast of present-day Iran, on behalf of the (Palmyrene) merchants of Spasinou Charax,<sup>61</sup> 138 AD. This is, parallel to Soados, the typical role of a caravan patron, acting for the merchants rather than as a merchant. Yarhibôlâ's brother Taimarşû (ID16 / TYMRŞW15), however, did travel with a caravan in person at an uncertain date in the first half of the second century AD,<sup>62</sup> documenting the family's direct involvement in Palmyrene caravan trade.

<sup>57</sup> Piersimoni (1995), 44, 590.

<sup>58</sup> Yon (2002), 50–51.

<sup>59</sup> RTP31 and 34, cf. Yon (2002), 50–51.

<sup>60</sup> PAT 0816.

<sup>61</sup> IPSPC G9 / PAT 1412.

<sup>62</sup> IPSPC G27 / PAT 309.

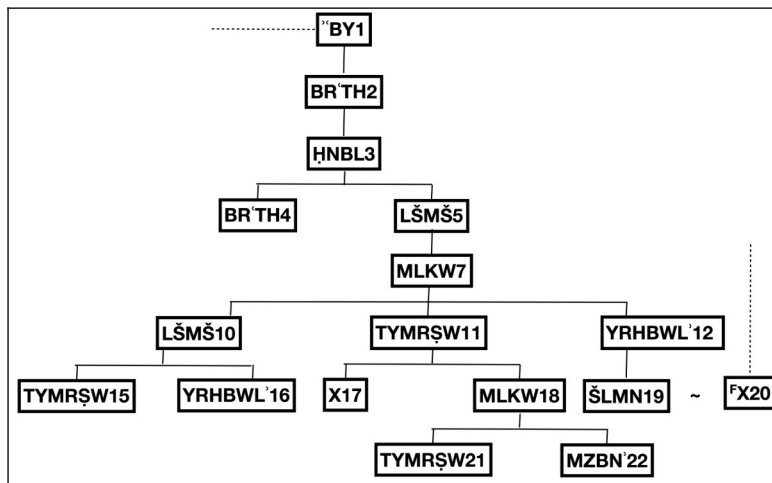


Fig. 7: Family tree of the A'abi family (partial).

## Further Families

Finally there are several examples of the importance of family in Palmyrene caravan trade that do not require a discussion of the entire family tree. Neša (ID5) of the 'Abissai family (Piersimoni [1995], 44) served as caravan leader on two occasions, in 142 and 150 AD.<sup>63</sup> No other offices are attested for his family, but the family can be traced across nine generations, possibly indicating a long-standing elite status in Palmyra.

Another prestigious family that was involved in the caravan trade is the Ba'as,<sup>64</sup> that can be attested across 11 generations and that had three known family tombs.<sup>65</sup> Their last known scion was Julius Aurelius Nebomai (ID22) who served as *synodiarch*, likely sometime in the third century.<sup>66</sup> The brothers Zabda'ateh (ID8) and Yaddai (ID12) each served as caravan leaders from Spasinou Charax 155 and 157 AD. Zabda'ateh built tower tomb 38 nearly twenty years later,<sup>67</sup> signifying that the family<sup>68</sup> had continued to enjoy wealth and prestige Palmyrene society over a prolonged period.

The Annubat family<sup>69</sup> boasted two cousins, Hairan (ID9) and Ḥabībî (ID10), who traveled with a caravan from Choumana, likely in Babylonia<sup>70</sup> in 157 AD,<sup>71</sup> honoring Marcus Ulpius Yarḥai (ID11). Ḥabībî's grandson, also named Ḥabībî, died in Rome and was commemorated by an unnamed brother there.<sup>72</sup> It is not certain that he was in Rome on business, but neither is it unlikely, and in any case it attests that the family continued to enjoy a certain affluence.

A case arguably demonstrating a different kind of family network is that of the Šewîrâ family (Piersimoni 60). Their latest attested descendant, 'Ogêlu (ID18), received four statues from the people and council due to his longstanding military assistance to the caravans as *strategos*.<sup>73</sup> This would situate him among the most prominent caravan patrons, but he is also honored for his tenure as caravan leader

63 IPSPC G12, 13 / PAT 0262, 1419.

64 Piersimoni (1995), 13.

65 Tower tombs 21, 67 and 68; Piersimoni (1995), 565.

66 IPSPC G33 / PAT 1360.

67 Piersimoni (1995), 699.

68 Piersimoni (1995), 235.

69 Piersimoni (1995), 77.

70 Seland (2016), 39.

71 IPSPC G18 / PAT 0306.

72 PAT 0250.

on multiple occasions. ‘Ogêlu’s family is interesting because his great grandfather dedicated an inscription in Wadi Hauran in Iraq together with his brother and a third individual 97 AD.<sup>74</sup> This shows a longstanding connection with the desert regions that Palmyrene caravans passed through, presumably with the nomads inhabiting these regions, and arguably also with military service, adding to the civic and religious sources of prestige and authority that other Palmyrene families involved in caravan trade boasted.

## Discussion

Situating Palmyrene caravan leaders with their families by means of prosopography allows several observations to be made. The most important is that the distinction between a group of caravan patrons and a group of caravan leaders, the latter being of lower status than the former, as argued by Will in his famous study<sup>75</sup> and accepted with modifications in much of subsequent scholarship including my own, cannot be maintained. Caravan patrons and caravan leaders do figure as separate categories in the epigraphic record, albeit with some limited overlap, the former group being on the receiving end of honors paid for and dedicated by the second group. However, there is little discernible difference in status. The caravan leaders we are able to identify within their family networks were sons, brothers and nephews of the individuals who were honored for their benevolence towards the caravans. It follows that they did not merely belong to the same sociopolitical and socioeconomic strata, but that they were connected with each other by kinship, friendship, and marital alliances. That, however, does not imply that Palmyra was ruled by a clique of ‘merchant princes’, as some commentators and most scholarship pre-Will have assumed. The cases outlined above reveal that commercial activities were only one basis of authority, others being religious, civic and military activities. Historical sociologist Michael Mann’s model of the sources of social power springs to mind. Mann argues that social power takes the form of overlapping networks of ideology, economy, military capacity, and politics.<sup>76</sup> Palmyrene caravan leaders specialized in one of these sources of power, but through their families, they diversified and integrated into other spheres of Palmyrene society.

This conclusion has arguably been anticipated by former studies of the Palmyrene elite showing how involvement of commercial activities was among their diversified means of securing income and influence in Palmyrene society.<sup>77</sup> This study, however, proceeds in the opposite direction, tracing the integration of commercial specialists in the civic, religious, and military elites of Palmyra. In that it also has bearings on our understanding of the place of trade in Palmyrene society. While elite involvement in trade in the Roman world is well documented, there is also evidence such activities were concealed. The most famous example is the anecdote that Cato the Elder engaged in maritime loans through a *societas* of 50 partners, using his freedman as his agent in order to avoid social stigma.<sup>78</sup> Cicero, while

---

73 IPSPC G29 / PAT 1378.

74 PAT 2738.

75 Will (1957).

76 Mann (1986–2013).

77 Esp. Andrade (2013); Seland (2016); Sommer (2018); Yon (2002).

78 Plut. Cato mai. 21,5.

looking down on small scale trade, nevertheless condoned large scale operations, especially if profits were invested in landed properties.<sup>79</sup> Even if allowing for variety over time and between different regions, commercial activities nevertheless rarely brought bragging rights within the social elites of the Roman world. Palmyra was different with respect to this. While the caravan inscriptions do not boast involvement in caravan trade, they show no attempts at hiding it. The elite status of the caravan leaders honoring their close family members will have been evident to contemporary observers. This does mark Palmyra as rather unique among ancient cities, making it fully deserving of its often applied label of caravan city.<sup>80</sup>

---

79 Cic. off. 1,151.

80 Rostovtzeff (1932b); Millar (1998).



## Abbreviations

- PAT: D.R. Hillers / Eleonora Cussini; Palmyrene Aramaic Texts, Baltimore / London 1996.
- IGLS: J.-B. Yon; Inscriptions grecques et latines de la Syrie. Palmyre. Tome XVII – Fascicule 1, Beyrouth 2012.
- IPSCP: S. Fox / G. Lieu; Inscriptiones palmyrenae selectae ad commercium pertinentes. Select Palmyrene Inscriptions on Commerce, Sydney, no date, [https://www.mq.edu.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0018/24525/106178.pdf](https://www.mq.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0018/24525/106178.pdf) (consulted 19.09.2023).
- RTP: H. Ingholt / H. Seyrig / J. Starcky; Recueil des Tesserres de Palmyre, Paris 1955.

## Bibliography

- Andrade (2012): N. Andrade, Inscribing the Citizen: Soados and the Civic Context of Palmyra, MAARAV 19 (2012), 65–90.
- Andrade (2013): N. Andrade, Syrian Identity in the Greco-Roman World, Oxford 2013.
- Andrade (2018): N. Andrade, Zenobia. Shooting Star of Palmyra, Oxford, 2018.
- Brughmans et al. (2021): T. Brughmans / O. Bobou / N. B. Kristensen / R. R. Thomsen / J. V. Jensen / E. H. Seland / R. Raja, A Kinship Network Analysis of Palmyrene Genealogies', Journal of Historical Network Research, 6/1 (2021), 41–84.
- Campmany Jiménez et al. (2022): J. Campmany Jiménez / I. Romanowska / R. Raja / E. H. Seland, Food Security in Roman Palmyra (Syria) in Light of Paleoclimatological Evidence and its Historical Implications', PloS One, 17/9 (2022), e0273241.
- Cremaschi / Zerboni (2016): M. Cremaschi / A. Zerboni, The Oasis of Palmyra in Prehistory, in P.F. Biehl / O. P. Nieuwenhuyse (eds.), Climate and Cultural Change in Prehistoric Europe and the Near East, Albany 2016, 13–36.
- Drexhage (1988): R. Drexhage, Untersuchungen zum römischen Osthandel, Bonn 1988.
- Fox / Lieu (n.d.): S. Fox / G. Lieu, Inscriptiones palmyrenae selectae ad commercium pertinentes. Select Palmyrene Inscriptions on commerce, Sydney, no date, [https://www.mq.edu.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0018/24525/106178.pdf](https://www.mq.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0018/24525/106178.pdf) (consulted 19.09.2023).
- Gawlikowski (1994): M. Gawlikowski, Palmyra as a Trading Centre, Iraq 56 (1994), 27–33.
- Gawlikowski (2021): M. Gawlikowski, Tadmor – Palmyra. A Caravan City Between East and West, Krakow 2021.
- Gregoratti (2015): L. Gregoratti, The Palmyrene Trade Lords and the Protection of the Caravans, ARAM 27 (2015), 155–167.
- Gregoratti (2020): L. Gregoratti, Temples and Traders in Palmyra', in P. Erdkamp, K. Verboven, and A. Zuiderhoek, Capital, Investment, and Innovation in the Roman World, Oxford 2020, 461–80.
- Gregoratti (2021): L. Gregoratti, The Palmyrene Trade Inscriptions in the Context of Near Eastern Policy: Changes and Evolution through Time., in D. Nappo (ed.), Economia e frontiera nell'Impero Romano, Bari 2021, 131–150.
- Hammad (2010): M. Hammad, Palmyre: Transformations urbaines: Développement d'une ville antique de la marge aride syrienne, Paris 2010.
- Hartmann (2001): U. Hartmann, Das Palmyrenische Teilreich, Stuttgart 2001.

- Mann (1986–2013): M. Mann, *The Sources of Social Power*, four vols., Cambridge 1986–2013.
- Manning (2018): J. G. Manning, *The Open Sea: The Economic Life of the Ancient Mediterranean World from the Iron Age to the Rise of Rome*, Princeton 2018.
- Meyer (2017): J. C. Meyer, *Palmyrena. Palmyra and the Surrounding Territory from the Roman to the Early Islamic Period*, Oxford 2017.
- Milik (1972): J. T. Milik, *Dédicaces faites par des dieux (Palmyre, Hatra, Tyr) et des thiasés sémitiques à l'époque romaine*, Paris 1972.
- Millar 1998: F. Millar, *Caravan Cities: The Roman Near East and Long Distance Trade by Land*, in M. Austin, J. Harries, and C. Smith (eds.) *Modus Operandi: Essays in Honor of Geoffrey Rickman*, London 1998, 119–137.
- Mommsen (1904): T. Mommsen, *Römische Geschichte – Fünfter Band: Die Provinzen von Caesar bis Diocletian*, Berlin 1904.
- Piersimoni (1995): P. Piersimoni, *The Palmyrene Prosopography*, London 1995.
- Raja (2022): R. Raja, *Pearl of the Desert: A History of Palmyra*, Oxford 2022.
- Rostovtzeff (1932a): M. I. Rostovtzeff, *Les inscriptions caravanières de Palmyre*, in G. Glotz (ed.) *Mélanges Gustave Glotz*, 2, Paris 1932, 793–811.
- Rostovtzeff (1932b): M.I. Rostovtzeff, *Caravan Cities*, London 1932.
- Sartre (2005): M. Sartre, *The Middle East under Rome*, London 2005.
- Seland (2014): E. H. Seland, *The Organization of the Palmyrene Caravan Trade*, *Ancient West and East* 13 (2014), 197–211.
- Seland (2016): E. H. Seland, *Ships of the Desert and Ships of the Sea. Palmyra in the World Trade of the First Three Centuries CE*, Wiesbaden 2016.
- Seland (2024): E. H. Seland, *Climate and Environment of Palmyra and the Syrian Desert*, in: R. Raja (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Palmyra*, Oxford 2024, 15–27.
- Sommer (2018): M. Sommer, *Roms orientalische Steppengrenze. Palmyra, Edessa, Dura-Europos, Hatra. Eine Kulturgeschichte von Pompeius bis Diocletian*, Stuttgart 2018.
- Teixidor (1984): J. Teixidor, *Un port romain du désert. Palmyre et son commerce d'Auguste à Caracalla*, *Semitica* 34 (1984), 1–127.
- Verboven / Carlier / Dumolyn 2007: K. Verboven / M. Carlier / J. Dumolyn, *A Short Manual to the Art of Prosopography*, in K. S. B. Keats-Rohan (ed.) *Prosopography Approaches and Applications. A Handbook*. Oxford 2007, 35–70.
- Weber (1921): M. Weber, *Die Stadt. Eine Soziologische Untersuchung*, Tübingen 1921.
- Will (1957): E. Will, *Marchands et chefs de caravanes à Palmyre*, *Syria* 34 (1957), 262–77.
- Yon (1998): J.-B. Yon, *Remarques sur une famille caravanière à Palmyre*, *Syria* 75 (1998), 153–160.
- Yon (2002): J.-B. Yon, *Les notables de Palmyre*, Beyrouth 2002.
- Young (2001): G. K. Young, *Rome's Eastern Trade. International Commerce and Imperial Policy, 31 BC – AD 305*, London 2001.

## Figure References

Fig. 1: After Piersimoni (1995), 654.

Fig. 2: After Piersimoni (1995), 563.

Fig. 3: After Piersimoni (1995), 636.

Fig. 4: Photo Jørgen Christian Meyer.

Fig. 6: After Piersimoni (1995), 697.

Fig. 7: After Piersimoni (1995), 608.

Fig. 8: After Piersimoni (1995), 590.

## Author Contact Information<sup>81</sup>

Prof. Dr. Eivind Heldaas Seland  
Department of Archaeology, History, Cultural Studies and Religion  
University of Bergen  
P.O. Box 7805  
N-5020 Bergen  
Norway  
E-mail: [eivind.seland@uib.no](mailto:eivind.seland@uib.no)

---

<sup>81</sup> The rights pertaining to content, text, graphics, and images, unless otherwise noted, are reserved by the author. This contribution is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0.