

TO

DOMENICO FACCENNA

This issue is dedicated in commemoration on the centenary of His birth,
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Palmyra and the Red Sea: *La Venise des sables* Thirty Years Later

by TOMMASO GNOLI

Nel corso degli ultimi trent'anni, nuove scoperte hanno profondamente modificato la nostra conoscenza del commercio romano nel Mar Rosso. Il presente contributo si concentra sulle novità apportate dalle nuove scoperte, che consentono di tracciare un quadro più ampio e articolato di tale commercio. Qui viene proposta una nuova ipotesi: poiché nel III secolo EC le attività commerciali di Palmira furono messe in pericolo dalle crescenti ostilità tra Roma e i Sasanidi lungo l'Eufrate, le rotte commerciali furono deviate verso il Mar Rosso, Berenice e da lì verso Coptos e Alessandria. In questo contesto, l'occupazione dell'Egitto da parte di Zenobia e Vaballath non sembra più un'azione bizzarra e sconsiderata, ma corrisponde piuttosto a una chiara strategia economica.

Thirty years have gone by since Ernest Will published his work, which in his intention was not destined only to a limited group of specialists, but it was aimed at meeting the interest of a wider public: *Les Palmyréniens*, this was its title, to which the author added a much suggestive and successful subtitle: *la Venise des sables*.¹ Will explained the reasons that had led him to this apparently strange juxtaposition between Palmyra and the luckiest of the Maritime Republics. The elements that allowed this comparison between the Desert Queen and the Queen of the Mediterranean were the history of that commercial hub operating between the Roman East and Asia, its political organisation funded on a trade aristocracy wide enough as to allow for it the definition of *république de marchands*, so much so that Jean Baptiste Yon was able to depict a detailed picture of that *notabilat palmyrénien* (Yon 2002).

To be honest, the comparison between Palmyra and Venice was also allowed by the existence of internal elements. Scholars were aware of a frieze from one of the tower graves that are typical for the necropolises around the caravan city of Palmyra, the sepulcher of the Marona family located in the necropolis to the south-west of the city. That frieze that was long displayed at the Museum of Palmyra, showed a ship with a square sail.² Next to the ship in a very damaged part of the frieze there stood a character dressed in a Palmyrenean fashion, and the paws of a camel are still visible. Apparently, this is a quite mismatched representation in a desert city that is hundreds of kilometres far from the next river and thousands from the sea. However, the links between the desert hubs and the harbours on the sea are well attested in the ancient

¹ Will 1992. Gawlikowski 1994a wrote a very important review to this work, which reaches far beyond the limits of a simple review.

² The most recent filing of this find I know about: Raja 2020: 139 no. 5 with literature.

sources. Palmyra is the best represented, but it is not the only example: this city as much as many more are called λιμήν/*portus*,³ a reference to Bernard's compilation *Les portes du désert* is in order.⁴ However, it is evident that the subtitle of Will's monograph is not connected to that erudite and somehow conceptual parallel, but rather to *idées reçues* that the vast public of readers had of both Palmyra and Venice, i.e. *citées marchandes* during their periods of maximum splendour.

Few years later, another monograph appeared which dealt with a newly found document that was to innovate our knowledge about the Roman maritime trade in the Red Sea.⁵ That document was a Greek papyrus preserved in Vienna and known as Papyrus of Muziris. It contained a quite incomplete section with two very complex navigation contracts between the Egyptian and the Indian shores, from the harbour of Berenike to the harbour of Muziris. This papyrus contains the details of the cargo of the big ship called Hermapollon, which sailed back from India loaded with precious goods. De Romanis inaugurated a research line in that monograph of his which he would not leave thereafter, and which would give fundamental results over the last twenty-five years.⁶ Many of the technical aspects related to the reading and interpretation of this papyrus and to the literary texts that are strictly bound to it in particular—just to mention the two most relevant ones: the fundamental amendment of *PME* 56 that actually mentions the μέ<γι>στα πλοῖα that were adopted for the transport of pepper and malabathron; or the essential clarifications that allow to understand Plin., *NH* VI, 101-106 correctly—were already there in that monograph. However, the last twenty-five years have been extremely productive for de Romanis. His last monograph differs a lot from the former. New readings and interpretations have led him to new reflections on the fundamental Papyrus of Muziris and to modifications of his previous positions.⁷ Nevertheless, this is not the only reason that explains the differences between his last monograph and the first one. In the meanwhile, many discoveries have seen the light, some of outstanding importance: the landscape of the documentations about the Red Sea trade in Roman times has incredibly grown over the last thirty years. After the beginning of the French-Italian project for the publication of an Inventory of the South-Arabian inscriptions edited by the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres and the Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente (IsMEO), the first volume of which was published in 1992;⁸ following the great developments by

³ *CIL* VIII 4508, from Zaraia, in Numidia: *lex portus post discessum coh(ortis) instituta*.

⁴ Bernard 1984. On Palmira and its *lex portus* also cf. Teixidor 1984; Healey 2014; Perassi, Bona 2016.

⁵ Useless to say that as Red Sea we understand here the immense strait as known from *Periplus Maris Erythraei* (*PME*). Sidebotham 1986 represents the most relevant synthesis about the *PME*, and it was published right at the moment when the *editio princeps* of that cutting-edge papyrus was released. About it the following footnote. The current reference edition of that text is in Casson 1989, to which Belfiore 2004 and Seland 2010 shall be added. Cf. also, Ruffing 2017.

⁶ This document is PVindob. G 40822 and it was first published by Harrauer, Sijpesteijn 1985 (SB XVIII 13167). There was immediately a deep interest around it, so much so that when De Romanis, published his monograph ten years later there were already many discussions about reading variations and integrations for this incomplete text: De Romanis 1996; cf. now Id. 2020.

⁷ Among the most relevant in this sense: Casson 1990, Morelli 2011.

⁸ So far eight volumes of inscriptions and three of iconographic inventory have been published: Robin 1992; Gnoli 1993; Avanzini 1995; Bron 1998; Antonini 2001; Frantsouzzoff 2001; Arbach 2002; Aquil, Antonini 2007; Frantsouzzoff 2007; 2016.

the French archaeological expeditions in the eastern Egyptian desert above all by the team led by Hélène Cuvigny (Bingen et al. 1992; Cuvigny et al. 1993; Cuvigny 2003; 2005; Brun, Cuvigny 2012); after the surprising discoveries in a cave on the island of Soqatra (Robin, Gorea 2002) and on the hot and dry islands of Farasan (Villeneuve 2004); eventually, after the acknowledgment of the core importance of the Horn of Africa due to the pioneering activity of Glen Bowersock (2013), there is no stretch of the long route of the trade of pepper and malabathron that has not given surprising new information so far.⁹

These discoveries have radically transformed the perspective of de Romanis in his 1996 monograph in a way that was not foreseeable at all. Moreover, the shipwreck of a Palmyrene on the island of Soqatra gives a concrete form to the visionary picture by Ernest Will, from which we have started this discussion. Not by chance another French scholar, Maurice Sartre, published in 2021 a recap of the ancient ‘globalisation’ under a beautiful as much as concrete title: *Le Bateau de Palmyre*. It took thirty years, but at last the *Venise des sables* has got its fleet.

At the beginnings of last century’s 90es a set of 17 Greek papyri and parchments together with two Syrian texts came to light as found on the antiquity market. All were published in that decade itself.¹⁰ Many of the data contained in those texts have been exploited even before their complete edition in works that are still crucial in the field of the Roman Near East.¹¹ Differently from what the editors of those texts maintained, I believed that they had another origin: instead of Dura Europos, I stated and still maintain that most probably they come from an area to the North of Dura and from the opposite shore of the river Euphrates, i.e., Edessa and the Province Osroene.¹²

Starting from those documents I had the chance to check a series of institutional matters pertaining the status of Palmyra that have been under discussion for more than one century, but failing to reach any shared results, either considering it as a Roman imperial city like many others,¹³ or as a more or less autonomous one, to which the Roman hegemony would allow free spaces so as to grant the *Venise des sables* the chance to act as an intermediary between the two great empires of antiquity—the latter hypothesis took its origin from a passage of Pliny’s *Naturalis Historia* and reached until Benjamin Isaac, Fergus Millar and many more.¹⁴

⁹ One more research field that has produced huge progress for the last twenty-five years is the one pertaining the Indian subcontinent. Cf. De Romanis 2020.

¹⁰ The whole set of texts is known as PEuphr. Feissel, Gascou 1989; 1995; 2000; Teixidor 1990; Feissel, Gascou, Teixidor 1997. The Syriac parchments were published again by Drijvers, Healey 1999.

¹¹ The most striking example is Millar 1993, who availed himself only of preliminary remarks (Feissel, Gascou 1989 and Teixidor 1990), but in his book he took advantage also of some of the data in those documents that were yet unpublished.

¹² About the historical geography of the Middle Euphrates see Gnoli 2000. *Contra*, besides the contributions mentioned in fn. 16, see also Luther 1997. A different geographical origin would be relevant to contextualize the administrative data attested in the documents; *contra* recently, but based on mere issues of principle, Merola 2012.

¹³ Cf. Sartre 1996 (and e.g. Sartre, Sartre-Fauriat 2014). Such view can be trace back to Seyrig 1941: 173: “dont toute la mesure où l’on peut juger, Palmyre n’était pas plus étrangère à l’empire que l’étaient Antioche ou Apamée;” cf. also, Gawlikowski 2021: 45: “there can be no doubt that Palmyra was just a city like any other within the Roman province of Syria.”

¹⁴ I don’t share the exegesis of Pliny by Will 1985. It is behind the scopes of this article to list recent works concerning institutional peculiarity of Palmyra. The allusions in the text are Isaac 1992 and Millar 1993.

Including those documents in the discussion allowed a strict comparison between Palmyra and the other cities of the Roman world, Edessa above all. Anyway, it is not on these political-institutional issues that the monograph by De Romanis has stimulated me, but rather more on the caravan trade of Palmyra.¹⁵

As well known, this aspect crucial for those who aim at understanding all the evolution of the hundreds-of-years long history of Palmyra is well attested in a certain number of epigraphic texts usually known as ‘caravan inscriptions.’¹⁶ Of the 37 texts which directly or indirectly inform us about the Palmyrene caravans, only 5 can be dated back to the 2nd-3rd centuries, i.e., to the moment in which the trade success of the city had such an increase as to constitute the premises to the extraordinary and short ‘Palmyrene Empire’. Michał Gawlikowski has recently written: “During the one-hundred-year period following 161, we can only indicate five dated caravan inscriptions: in 193, 199, 211, 247, and 258. This does not take the place of statistics, of course, but the fact that there were about twenty caravans during the thirty-year period preceding the war is striking and hardly accidental” (Gawlikowski 2021: 47).

It is hard to explain how—while the city was taking the shape, we know of from its archaeological remains, and while its aristocracy was accumulating enormous riches so much so that it took a leading position in the whole Roman East including Egypt—the trade from which that power originated had already been in crisis for more than one century because of the worsening geo-political situations!

The way that trade was practiced had been modified for a long time already. I had agreed with the general idea that there had been a progressive ‘militarisation’ of the Palmyrene caravans combined with an authoritarian hardening of the city institutions:

The decline of the Parthian power – I was referring to the years that followed the expedition by Lucius Verus –, and the following state of continued fighting between Rome and the Sasanians inevitably had severe consequences on the Palmyrene trade system [...] It must be held that because of that new political and military situation Palmyra reacted in the most obvious way: regrouping the caravans, making them bigger and bigger and better defensible. It is possible that of those changed conditions [...] archaeological and epigraphic traces have remained. In a fresh contribution by Jean-Marie Dentzer (it was published in 1994 n.b.a) that focuses on the aerial photographs taken in the 30s of the 20th century by the French Air Force, the author was able to identify at least fifteen buildings outside the city that because of their shape and type might be understood as caravanserais. Those buildings were employed for a short period and were built at the end of the 2nd or at the beginning of the 3rd centuries. In a yet to publish inscription mention is made of a ‘caravan of all the Palmyrenes’: is it unlikely to understand this text as referred to one of those caravans that travelled across the desert in wartime? We have not reflected on the dimensions of the caravans yet as the data we possess do not allow it. However, when it has been possible, i.e., on the other great caravan route connecting the Nile with the Red Sea, Federico de Romanis has shown how the caravan ac-

¹⁵ A series of studies about the various technical aspects of that trade have increased in number, even though never in the direction traced by De Romanis 1996; cf. the recent interesting contributions by Eivind Seland 2014; 2015a; 2015b. Cf. also Agut-Labordère, Redon 2020.

¹⁶ A list of the caravan inscriptions in Gawlikowski 1994b: 32-33, to which *CIS* 3928 and *Inv.* X 97 = *IGLS* XVII.1, 253 shall be added. Among the most relevant, besides those mentioned in the fn. hereabove: Will 1957; Gawlikowski 1996; Millar 1998; Young 2001: 123-168.

counted thousands of beasts of burden. Obviously, even the constitution of such huge caravans would not be effective in the case of Palmyra if there had not been an intense preventive diplomatic activity, not only with the Persians, to reach a certain degree of safety. Such an activity is hardly conceivable if the city had been an integrated part of the Roman empire while in Iran Ardašīr or Šābuhr reigned.¹⁷

One more document of crucial importance for the study of the caravan trade was interpreted with acumen by De Romanis. It is a most strange graffito found by chance in a tower grave which was later destroyed to its foundations by Daesh. Michał Gawlikowski has recently talked about the way this piece was discovered. His little child, who had accompanied him on the site of the excavations, found the graffito as it stood at his height, and he immediately attracted his father's attention on it (Gawlikowski 2021: 42). The first edition of this find was not that good (Gawlikowski 1986) and it is only thanks to De Romanis that this document can be employed correctly now.¹⁸ For inexplicable reasons, an anonymous hand felt the need to carve into the plaster of the grave at a height that was accessible to a child the total value of the goods imported by Palmyra in one month of an unknown year: it is an enormous value corresponding either to 13 or 50 times the cargo of the Hermapollon, depending on how the sum shall be understood, whether as the total value of the goods or as the 25% tax to be paid for them. If the latter option is accepted the total value of the imported goods shall be multiplied by 4. This Palmyrene graffito cannot be dated. Gawlikowski's proposal which dated it back to the middle of the 3rd century does not match because of a series of faulty readings. Still there is no way to give it a precise chronological location, but for prudent comparisons on its accounting system with other documents from the Near East, which seem to testify in favour of an older dating in the middle of the 2nd century.¹⁹

The whole of the Palmyrene documentation had already long demonstrated that Palmyra was strictly connected with the harbour of Spasinou Carax on the Persian Gulf and that some Palmyrene had even acted as diplomats on behalf of the kings of Characene in key-locations for the navigation in the Gulf—just think about the famous inscription found in Palmyra in which in 131 CE the merchants from Spasinou Charax celebrated Iarhai, son of Nebūzabad, who is defined “the satrap of the citizens of Tīlouan (Bahrein), on account of Meerdate, king of Spasinou Charax.”²⁰ Not only, an important inscription found in the colonnade of the temple of Bel together with the well-known grave relief mentioned above testify to the existence of ‘Palmyrene ships’: the ship with a square sail of the relief mentioned at the beginning of this contribution and the ‘ship of Ogeilos’ of the inscription taking back the merchants ‘from Skhytia’ (i.e., from Barygaza).²¹ The Palmyrene were not only camel drivers at ease in the stony

¹⁷ Gnoli 2000: 135-136, with reference in a fn. to De Romanis 1996: 195. The article mentioned is Dentzer 1994.

¹⁸ De Romanis 2004. Ruffing 2008: 837 uses Gawlikowski 1986 for some important consideration on the economic evolution in the 3rd century.

¹⁹ This conclusion was very prudently proposed by De Romanis 2004: 470.

²⁰ This inscription is inscribed on a consolle in the Great Colonnade: *IGLS* XVII.1, 245. The literature about this extraordinary document is endless. Cf. at least Schuol 2000: 56-57 no. 9.

²¹ *IGLS* XVII.1, 26. The text is very damaged and hardly readable. Yon prefers a dating around the middle of the 2nd century “sans plus de précision ou d’assurance.” Skhytia as mentioned in the inscription corresponds to “Barygaza or Skythia” in *PME* 57, about which cf. De Romanis 2020: 64, 151-153.

Syrian desert, but they were also good sailors. The big Palmyrene caravans travelled steadily across the desert from the oasis to some point on the river Euphrates,²² from there they came down the valley often crossing it on rafts made of leather jugs, the builders of which are well attested in Palmyra.²³ Then, at the mouth of the Euphrates, in the kingdom of Characene, the goods were loaded on ships that sailed along the Persian Gulf to the Asian shores of India.

All those documents did not allow to separate Palmyra's trade from the great river route on the Euphrates and then from the Persian Gulf, etc. In this sense two documents from the eastern Egyptian desert represent some sort of alien elements in the not abundant *corpus* related to the Palmyrene trade. The most impressive document testifies to the presence of "merchants from the Red Sea" of Palmyrene origins in Coptos, on the right shore of the Nile.²⁴ The onomastics of the city, Palmyra Adriana, tends to confirm a dating to the second half of the 2nd century, but it does not allow to exclude even the 3rd century. Since a guild of *Erythraikai naukleroi* is attested in Coptos on further texts not connected with Palmyrene people,²⁵ Bertrand decided to understand the specification 'Palmyra Adriana' as referred to those who were from that Syrian city. Still the theoretical possibility remains that there was a guild of "Palmyrene merchants from the Red Sea" who were active in Coptos.²⁶ One more inscription from Tentyra located nearby and to the north talks about one more Palmyrene who wrote a bilingual text (Greek and Palmyrene) which is really hardly datable. The latter text is very damaged and cannot be fully exploited, but we find two keywords in it: *emporoi*, merchants, and *synodian*, caravan.²⁷ As well known, in Coptos itself an inscription was found which mentions some Palmyrene people who were not involved in trade activities. *I. Portes* 85 is a dedication to the great god Hierabol by a *vexillarius* of the archers from Adriana Palmyra Antoniana, who bore the name of M. Aurelius Belakabos, and he gave it on 14th July of 216. Most probably, all these documents should be dated back to the first decade of the 3rd century. To these poor testimonies today maybe we can add another document, which is extraordinary in many respects, but shows some oddities that suggest the adoption of a prudent attitude when referring to it. It is dated to the 3rd century, to July 258. It is the Palmyrene tablet discovered on the Island of Soqatra.

In the month of tammūz, I on the 25th day of the year I 569 (Seleucid), I, Abgar, son of II 'Abbšamayā' šmmr,²⁸ I came here, with pain in my soul, I all this way. May

²² Dura Europos is often mentioned in this context, but more likely there was a caravan route driving to Hit, to the south of Dura, cf. Will 1957: 269; Gawlikowski 1988: 169; Ruffing 2010; Meyer, Seeland 2016; Kaizer 2017: 84; Palermo 2019: 34; Edwell 2022: 324. Still to be explained the strong presence of Palmyrene people in Dura. Cf. Dirven 1999.

²³ *IGLS* XVII.1, 59. About the guild of the ἄσκοναυτοποιοί cf. now Gnoli 2021.

²⁴ *I. Portes* 103 with important corrections by Bingen 1984.

²⁵ *I. Portes* 65, 90.

²⁶ I obviously mention this theoretical possibility as due to the way on can understand the genitive in the inscription. I share the position of Bertrand, that it is a partitive.

²⁷ *I. Portes* 39.

²⁸ The word *šmmr* right after the patronymic can be a part of the latter, or, more likely, be an apposition of the latter. If it refers to a function, which is possible, it might mean, from Arabic rather than Aramaic, something like 'emissary' or 'sailor:' cf. Gorea in Robin, Gorea 2002, 438. This sentence shows several difficulties that prevent us from understanding it correctly, which might testify to the spuriousness of the entire text.

the god | who located me/us here | bless you. Man | you who will read this tablet ||
you will bless me/us and will leave | this tablet in its place.²⁹

But this is not sufficient. Among the South-Arabian inscriptions finally published in the French-Italian *corpus* there are two that were discovered in two different places in *Arabia Felix* that mention people defined as Palmyrene. Both those texts found respectively in a temple in Shabwa and on a rock nearby the royal residence of al-‘Uqla, mention a certain ‘Azīz and are dated to the kingdom of Ilī‘azz Yaluṭ, which coincided with that of Septimius Severus and Caracalla.³⁰ As those texts are dated to the same period, it is highly probable that the ‘Azīz in both was one and the same man. The text from Shabwa mentions also a certain Rabbī‘īl, a Palmyrene himself. Both are simply qualified by their patronymics and by the fact that they were both from Tadmor but dwelled in a place the name of which starts with the letter M... Together they dedicate bronze statues to the great god of Ḥaḍramawt, Sayīn dhu-Alīm. The text from al-‘Uqla is complete, but unfortunately, it is little informative. In it the two people from Tadmor are called Khayrī and ‘Azīz, they do not bear any patronymics and are the first one in three couples of people—the other two groups are composed of two Chaldean and two Indian people—who accompanied their lord Ilī‘azz Yaluṭ, king of Ḥaḍramawt. It is hard to explain which were the functions of those three Palmyrene people who visited the kingdom of Ḥaḍramawt in the very first years of the 3rd century. They acted as ambassadors but are not qualified as such. I do not think we should linger any further on these documents, but it is necessary to add these testimonies to those that attest the growing interest of Palmyra in the Red Sea during the 3rd century.

Thus, the current documentation about Palmyra shows five testimonies the dating of which starts since the Severian time and that are referred to the trade route that from the Persian Gulf up along the Euphrates led to Palmyra; and five (or four) more related to the other route that from the Red Sea led to Coptos and Tebtynis and eventually to Alexandria. Is it too much to assert that the Palmyrene merchants reacted to the new geo-political conditions with Iran on the one side gathering caravan groups together to cross the desert, and on the other hand, diverting assets to the other trade route, the Egyptian one? I did not take this hypothesis into consideration in 2000, but now it seems the most probable to me, as it provides a more accurate and solid contextualisation to the occupation of Egypt by Waballat and his mother Zenobia.³¹ If we assumed this possibility, as much unavoidable consequences will be derived: the explanation of the progressive usurpation of the power in the East by Odenatus and of the ostensible oddities in his titles, and in the ones of Waballat and Zenobia. The latter cannot be explained based on an alleged roughness on the side of those uncultured

²⁹ Trad. by Gorea 2013b, 451 that modifies substantially *editio princeps* in Robin, Gorea 2002: 434. This text as painted on 11 lines is perfectly readable cf. Robin, Gorea 2002: 421 figs 7-8; 2013b: 449-450 figs 1-3. The comment and the reading of the uncertain passages is in Gorea 2013b who makes Robin, Gorea 2002 outdated.

³⁰ About the South-Arabian inscriptions, see Robin 2013. The two texts are RES 4691 (Shabwa) and RES 4859 (al-‘Uqla).

³¹ About the Palmyrene conquest of Egypt, the classic reference work is still Schwartz 1953 (and 1976), even though outdated in many respect. Cf. now Hartmann 2001: 278-289. Since the most detailed literary source is the *Historia Augusta*, the reconstruction of the events in this contribution owes a lot to the exegesis of this source, cf. Gnoli forthcoming.

people of the East who were incapable of understand the sharpness of the Roman public law, substantially unknown to them.³² As the Palmyrene *élites* were well inserted in the vital knots of the international trade on a ‘global scale,’ they were perfectly at ease with documents such as the Papyrus of Muziris that regulated their relations with Rome.

The two testimonies that attest the existence of customs in Palmyra dated to 161 (or 163) and 174 respectively³³ show that the 25% tax on goods, the so-called *tetarte*, i.e., the tax that in one month was to produce fiscal incomes 13 or 50 times the cargo of the Hermapollon, as results from the new reading of the Palmyrene graffito published by Gawlikowski and later improved by De Romanis,³⁴ was collected by a *bouleuta* from Antiochia in 161 and by a Roman citizen aided by an *actor* in 174. Any further documentation on this crucial aspect of the Palmyrene economy is missing. Nevertheless, ninety years after the testimony to the *tetarte* that dates to the 70s of the 2nd century, in the decisive 60s of the 3rd century a person appears, Iulius Aurelius Septimius Vorōd, who, among his titles also bears that of *argapetes* which is of Iranian origin. That man was one of the closest collaborators of Odenatus, and with the nine inscriptions referred to him, he is the best represented person in the whole documentation of Palmyra.³⁵ In a monograph of mine, I had shown how the title of *argapetes*, usually understood by all scholars of Palmyrene antiquities as meaning ‘head of the city’ and having a strong military meaning rather means ‘responsible for the tax collection,’ so totally disconnected from any military nuance (Gnoli 2007: 95-114). The erroneous explanation of this title was due to a paretymology proposed for this word as attested in its only testimony in the Roman world, but for the one we are now talking about, *PDura* 20 (Welles, Fink et al. 1959: 109-116). In an explanatory note, Richard Nelson Frye (in *ibid.*: 111-112 no. 15), consulted by the editors of the Papyri from Dura, had expressed his opinion with total confidence, and that explanation was accepted by anybody who has dealt with Dura and then Palmyra thereafter. Later, Frye himself recanted that etymology,³⁶ but it was too late, as it had never been questioned for a long time. If we accept that the Palmyrene Vorōd had a fiscal office, then clear analogies arise between his profile and the one of the arabarchs who managed the fiscal incomes in Egypt.³⁷

³² Gnoli 2000; 2007. In both contributions I propose a conscious and constant stretch of the institutional meaning of the titles awarded by Rome to the most prominent people of Palmyra and not only to them, before and after the *exploits* of Odenatus. Particularly relevant is the ὑπατεία/*consularitas*, which neither for Odenatus in Palmyra nor for king Abgar in Edessa (PMesopotamia 1) should be understood as the expression of the granting of *ornamenta consularia*, let alone of unattested and highly improbable consular offices, such as the rule over *Syria Phoenice* (which at that time was of praetorian and not consular rank).

³³ *IGLS* XVII.1, 196 e 197.

³⁴ Cf. *supra* nos 26, 2.

³⁵ *PIR*² S 350; *PLRE* I 981. The inscriptions are *IGLS* XVII.1, 61-67, to which one should add the Palmyrene text *PAT* 63, cf. eventually Gnoli 2019a: 258-259.

³⁶ Frye 1984, 223: “There were many officials under the satrap, especially accountants to care for the revenues, ‘*hmrkr*, the *hamarkār*. The chief collector of taxes was an important official called *hrkpty*, or *rpty* and *hrgwpt* in Parthian, an office formerly mistakenly interpreted as *argbad* or ‘fortress commander.’ For the Parthian period, we have no information about the position of the chief tax collector in the hierarchy, but presumably it was not high and only under the Sassanians does the office gain in importance.”

³⁷ On Arabarchy cf. Sabbatini Tumolesi 1993; Nappo 2008; 2015; Nappo, Zerbini 2011.

In a 2019 article of mine, I proposed the following comparison between Vorōd, as we can desume from his complex and rich career,³⁸ and that of a typical arabarch as exposed by Fabienne Burkhalter-Arce (1999; Gnoli 2019a). Like the Egyptian arabarchs, the argapet Vorōd was very rich, as he had been appointed with many financial offices; like the Egyptian arabarchs, the argapet Vorōd had had a series of offices in Palmyra and was involved in the political life of his hometown: eventually, like the Egyptian arabarchs, the argapet Vorōd was a Roman citizen. Notwithstanding the high number and relevance of his roles, towards the end of his life Vorōd dedicated a relief to an unknown god in his office as ‘Vorōd the argapet,’³⁹ just like Flavius Joseph, who called Tiberius Iulius Alexander simply ‘Alexander the alabarch.’⁴⁰

Luxury goods long-distance trade was one of the crucial driving forces for the widening of the geographical and cultural boundaries that culminated in the Roman imperial time. Notwithstanding many difficulties, the trade in luxury goods destined to the aristocracies of the Empire never really stopped thanks to the extraordinary flexibility of mediators that were very prompt in corresponding to geo-political changes.⁴¹ Fresh discoveries regarding the Palmyrene trade have highlighted at least three phases: the first and oldest one is badly documented, it coincides with the beginning of our era and seems to have privileged a Mesopotamian trade route, as a community of Palmyrene merchants are attested in Babylonia in 24 CE but never again later.⁴² The second phase was the one in which Palmyra reached its major success. During this period the main caravan trade route drove to Spasinou Charax and the Persian Gulf. During the Roman penetration into Mesopotamia under Septimius Severus and the following decades, the Palmyrene merchants began to prefer more and more alternative routes that were very far from their homeland Palmyra, but that were very profitable. The new ‘global’ merchants from Palmyra sailed the Indian Ocean, entered the Red Sea through the customs of the Farasan islands (Nappo 2015; Wilson 2015), the extreme Roman outpost on the Ocean. They sailed the Sea of Herakles—the ‘internal sea’ of the Greek-Roman oecumene was meaningfully circumscribed by the travels of that itinerant demigod, Herakles, from Gibraltar to Bāb el-Mandeb—up to Berenike, Egypt, the Nile and Alexandria, therefrom to Pozzuoli and Rome.⁴³ During the 3rd century the dynamic Palmyrene were all over, even though it is advisable not to ascribe mercantile activities to all the oriental people living in the Roman West.⁴⁴

³⁸ Among the extraordinary characteristics of the documentation related to Vorōd there is also the only inscription among the Palmyrene ones that can be considered as some sort of *cursus*: *IGLS XVII.1*, 67, dated back to April 267.

³⁹ *PAT* 67. The chronological location of this inscription to the end of Vorōd’s life is important. See Gnoli 2019a, 261.

⁴⁰ Joseph, *A.J.* XIX, 276-277.

⁴¹ Ruffing 2013. The desertion of the harbour of Berenike to the advantage of the harbours of Clysma and Aila located to the north during the 4th century was due to solid local geo-political reasons rather than to abstract general reflections on the crisis of the 3rd century: cf. Nappo 2007.

⁴² *IGLS XVII.1*, 16.

⁴³ About Pozzuoli: Terpstra 2015; about Rome Equini Schneider 1987; Fowlkes-Childs 2016; Bonnet 2018; and Gnoli forthcoming 2.

⁴⁴ Many among the Palmyrene attested in Rome were poor people, of servile rank who worked in the big *horrea* supplying the Roman plebs: Gnoli forthcoming 2. The significant group of Syrian people attested in Iulia Concordia, in Friuli, in the 5th century, most likely was composed of *fabricenses*, who worked in the local arrows factory: Gnoli 2019b; recently Helms 2021 proposed that the Safaitic Arabs who wrote the graffiti on the plaster of the theatre of Pompei were Syrian soldiers recruited by Vespasian.

Notwithstanding the relevant improvements of the last decades, a lot about this long-distance trade remains unexplained. First, what social and economic impact had this kind of trade in the society of the Greek-Roman empire: how many were the beneficiaries of this trade? The most recent quantitative studies in this field offer a surprising picture for those who have always thought that those goods were only for the few richest classes (De Romanis 2020: 100-106). In general, what stands out more and more evidently is that a primitivistic view of the economy of the antiquity is more and more unacceptable. Even though it is still very difficult to circumscribe the limits of the monetary economy in the Mediterranean world in the various phases of the imperial age, with the troubled dynamics that marked its evolution, it is also true that the banks, testified to in documents such as the Muziris Papyrus had to be widespread and were the means by which long distance trade exchanged could take place (Ruffing 2018; 2021). The study of the tax system bound to this kind of trade is another item in evidence.⁴⁵ The *portoria* did not pertain in general to the long-distance trade, certainly not in Palmyra, where the most famous document comes from, neither in Coptos most probably.⁴⁶

Ships used to sail in two directions and were never empty: long-distance trade was not an import trade only. This subject is crucial, badly testified to and difficult to study. The discoveries in the destination territories of the Mediterranean goods seem quite promising, even though a lot remains to do (De Romanis 2020: Cap. 4). We should not expect interesting results only from the Indian subcontinent. In 1942 Romanelli had published a funerary relief now preserved at the Museum of Chieti. It is an unwritten stele on which André Tchernia has recently newly attracted our attention. In it, behind a row of togated people (six men and a woman) a dromedary driven by a camel driver and carrying wine amphoras is depicted.⁴⁷

The Indian aristocracies were interested in wine, but not only. Another important good were metals, exported in the form of coins, even though some modern scholars do not agree on many basic aspects of ancient monetary economy, on the relationship between the inherent value of coins and their nominal value. It is impossible even to start facing this problem here, as it would lead us to discuss the general evaluation of the economic 'style' of the 3rd and 4th centuries at least.⁴⁸

The new acquisitions contribute in a decisive way to a new and complex representation of the Roman trade in the Red Sea. The Papyrus of Muziris reveals the ways in which those long-distance connections were possible and very profitable. More specifically, some discoveries in the last years have made the role of the Palmyrene merchants in this trade much clearer. Their commercial interests were far away from their homeland, which was not involved in this trade route at all. This is a further confirmation of how simplistic and eventually wrong it is to land in the harbour of geographical determinism. It was not the position of Palmyra that guaranteed its centuries

⁴⁵ Kritzinger, Schleicher et al. 2015; Günther 2016; 2021. The law documentation informs about a later period than the one examined here: *Dig.* XXXIX 4.16.7; *CTh.* IV 13.6 (366); *CTh.* IV 13.8 (381); *CJ.* IV 42.2 (459); Menandro 2.212 (562).

⁴⁶ The new edition of the Palmyra Tariff is in: Healey 2014; cf. Perassi, Bona 2016.

⁴⁷ Tchernia 1992: 299 fig. 2 = 2016, 226 fig. 13.4; I owe this news to my colleague A. Augenti, to whom I am thankful.

⁴⁸ I take the concept of 'style' from Mazzarino 1951, taken up also among others by Lo Cascio 1984 in a very important contribution of him.

long central role in the trade relationships between East and West, but rather the stiff resolution of generations of brave merchants who were prepared to make any sacrifices to ensure themselves and their hometown the role it would play in the extraordinary *heure de Palmyre* (Gagé 1964).

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