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*Portraying the Literacy of Palmyra
The Evidence of Funerary Sculpture
and Its Interpretation*

THE MULTILINGUAL AND MULTICULTURAL LANDSCAPE OF PALMYRA: THE INSCRIPTIONS AND FUNERARY PORTRAITS

Like Edessa, Palmyra was the only city in the Roman Syria where the local Aramaic dialect has never gone out of use, nor has it been displaced in inscriptions. The most important inscription from Palmyra is that of the famous Tax Law.¹ Passed as a decree of the City Council, the law was carved in 137 CE on a large limestone stele. Of key importance is the fact that the text of the Tax Law regulating importation and exportation of goods from the city was inscribed in two languages: Greek and Palmyrene Aramaic. The bilingualism of the Palmyrene Tax Law certainly indicates the importance both of Greek and Palmyrene as official languages: the first one as official language of the Roman East (and the contemporary *lingua franca*) and the second one as a local official language of Palmyra. The fact that inscriptions were carved in two languages suggests also that there were two groups of readers in Palmyra; what they differed was the level of knowledge of Greek language and alphabet. Doubtless they were necessary to operate within the existing contemporary legal and administrative-type institutions, to conduct business and family affairs. However in the Graeco-Roman world the knowledge of Greek was also the tool of increasing the distance between the notables and the lower strata of the society.²

In 1881, seven beech-wood plates measuring 14.5 by 12cm, forming a small book of wax tablets have been presented by A.D. van Assendelft de Coningh to Leiden University Library.³ They are known as the Assendelft Tablets (*Tabulae Ceratae Assendelftiana*). Fragments of Hesiodus's *Works and Days* are inscribed on them and fragments of stories by the Roman writer Babrius, a favorite school author of the middle and the late Roman Empire. The text is written in Greek, seemingly by an untrained hand, with errors, deletions, and inserted notes which seem to indicate that these were, in fact, the notes of a schoolboy. Several morphological and syntax errors may even indicate that Greek was not the author's native language. The originality of tablets is beyond question though it is impossible to ascertain their provenience. Van Assendelft stated that they were acquired by his brother at Palmyra. If so, they may provide further evidence that in Palmyra, at least in the third century CE, children and adolescents were taught Greek.⁴ Doubtless the society of Palmyra has been Hellenized or semi-Hellenized. The question arouses if the phenomenon of *Paideia* reflected in concepts of second and third sophistic have been commonly followed there. To answer it is one of the goals of this article.

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¹ J.F. MATTHEWS, The Tax Law of Palmyra: Evidence for Economic History in a City of the Roman East, *JRS* 74, 1988, pp. 157–180.

² P. VEYNE, *L'empire gréco-romain*, Paris 2005 [= Empire], pp. 149–152.

³ D.C. HESSELING, On Waxen Tablets with Fables of Babrius (*Tabulae Ceratae Assendelftiana*), *JHS* 13, 1892–1893, pp. 293–314.

⁴ VEYNE, *Empire*, p. 318.

The epigraphic material from Palmyra consists in fact of a large extent of inscriptions. To date about three thousand Palmyrene Aramaic inscriptions have been found in Palmyra, several hundred Greek and a few Latin ones.⁵ Interestingly most of them are associated with local sepulchral art. They were typically placed over the entrances to funerary towers, tombs, and funerary temples constructed over the period of three hundred years in the *necropoleis* surrounding the city. They were also placed on the inside walls and on the limestone slabs of approximately 40 x 50cm used to seal burial niches (*loculi*) inside the tombs.⁶ The slabs are usually decorated with funerary reliefs depicting the deceased originally buried in burial niches. The abundant corpus of Palmyrene portraits consist mainly of busts. Most of them are labeled with inscriptions placed above the deceased's shoulder, written in Palmyrene Aramaic and providing his name and genealogy (inscriptions in Greek are rare). A few inscriptions also provide the date of death according to the Seleucid era or 312 BCE, the earliest portraits dating from 65/6 CE and the last ones from 252 CE.⁷

Typically, the Palmyrene funerary portraits do not bear any features characteristic for the individuals thus portrayed. On the contrary, the same frontal convention is used, with no facial resemblance of the deceased, or his age, or sometimes even gender.⁸ What they depict is a wide range of individuals varying in dress, appearance and attributes manifesting together with epigraphic data their origin, family connections, religious beliefs, occupation, citizenship and legal status. Thus, they provide a unique picture of a thriving population of that city. Under Roman domination, many Palmyrene families enriched, in large part due to taking part in adventurous commercial expeditions. This can be clearly seen in male reliefs as they begin to reflect the attributes of occupations of the deceased. Those attending the caravans are portrayed while handling swords and whips. The priests hold ritual vessels while others are shown holding eschatological symbols such as leaves or pine cones. And in some cases men are handling books which scholars generally interpret as clear manifestations of their 'education'.⁹ Apparently writing utensils seem to be very popular iconographic motive in decoration of male busts found in Palmyra. The preserved number of such busts can be estimated at about 150–200. Some of them are not accessible or are unpublished. As a result approximately 145 such busts were taken into consideration in this analysis. Several female busts with keys were also found and two of them were also included in this article.¹⁰ Finally the one female bust with writing attributes has been recently discussed as an example of female literacy in Palmyra.¹¹ The gathered corpus of

⁵ T. KAIZER, *The religious life of Palmyra: a study of the social patterns of worship in the Roman period*, Stuttgart 2002, p. 27.

⁶ M.A.R. COLLEDGE, *The Art of Palmyra*, London 1976 [= *Art of Palmyra*], p. 62.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

⁸ VEYNE, *Empire*, p. 349.

⁹ COLLEDGE, *Art of Palmyra*, p. 247.

¹⁰ The Palmyrene workshops often produced almost identical busts. Consequently, several of the busts with tablets and *schedulae* (see on the next pages) are almost identical and come from the similar chronological period. Moreover, just a few contain new iconographic and epigraphic material.

¹¹ See: A. SMITH, *Identity, Community, and State Formation at Roman Palmyra*, unpublished PhD thesis, the Faculty of the Graduate School of the University of Maryland 2004 [= *Identity, Community, and State*

figurative art becomes obviously an important source of information, both epigraphic and visual, concerning the literacy of inhabitants of that city.¹² The writing utensils depicted in Palmyrene funerary sculpture could be now identified and classified according to stylistic and iconographic details. The interpretation of their representations will make possible to reconstruct the original contexts of their use. Thus the literacy of one of the most important sites of the Roman Syria will be portrayed.

THE CLASSIFICATION OF DEPICTED ATTRIBUTES

Researchers analyzing classification and typology of the Palmyrene busts use a variety of terms to describe writing materials: tablet (*tabula*),¹³ *stylus* and wax tablet,¹⁴ roll (*volumen*),¹⁵ diptych,¹⁶ and *schedula*.¹⁷ However, these groups of attributes have never been classified. Moreover, the busts depicted with writing materials are sometimes described as *scribes*.¹⁸ Nothing could be farther from truth. In fact, there is no epigraphic nor visual data suggesting that busts depicted with these attributes represent professional writers or teachers.

The present study illustrates that Palmyrene funerary busts were decorated with writing attributes which can be now classified as rolls (and *capsa*), *codexes*, tablets, *schedula*, double *schedula*, and *stylus*. Interestingly, keys, non-writing utensils themselves, also gather some evidence documenting the literacy of Palmyra (**Tab. 1**). Particularly noteworthy is a group of twelve male busts in which the deceased are portrayed holding more than one writing tool. Contrary to other representations this is not a homogeneous group. On some there are *codices* and rolls, as for example in case of a high-quality bust of Zenobios-Zabdateh, son of Dionysius, who was honored by a bilingual Aramaic and Greek dedication shown above Zenobios's left shoulder (**Fig. 2**). Behind his right shoulder one can see a Doric pilaster on which an upright roll tied with a ribbon and a codex are posed. Remarkable is a carefully executed codex cover which is decorated with a large rhomboidal mark, probably indicating a decoration, perhaps a precious stone that often decorated covers of luxurious ancient editions.¹⁹ A similar, equally carefully executed image of the codex and roll can

Formation], p. 213, Fig. 33. In my opinion it could be a part of family banquet curved in relief rather than a funerary bust.

¹² The numerous graffiti prove that both Palmyrene Aramaic and Greek were practiced in handwriting. However, the only remains of ancient documents from the oasis of Palmyra are three small fragments of papyrus from the Tower of Kitot (cf. H.M. COTTON, W.E.H. COCKLE, F.G.B. MILLAR, *The Papyrology of the Roman Near East: A Survey*, *JRS* 85, 1995, p. 219). Until today, these preserved undamaged inscriptions were practically the only sources of information about literacy among inhabitants of Palmyra.

¹³ COLLEDGE, *Art of Palmyra*, p. 247.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 247.

¹⁶ G. PLOUG, *Catalogue of the Palmyrene Sculptures*. Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, København 1995 [= Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek], pp. 134–135; A. SADURSKA, A. BOUNNI, *Les sculptures funéraires de Palmyre*, *RdA Supplementi* 13, Roma 1994 [= *Sculptures funéraires*], cat. 24, 27, 52, 64, 101, 104, 111, 142, 182, 210, 211, 221.

¹⁷ COLLEDGE, *Art of Palmyra*, pp. 247–248.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 69; K. PARLASCA, *Ikonographische Probleme Palmyrenischer Grabreliefs*, *DamMitt* 3, 1988, p. 215.

¹⁹ C.H. ROGERS, T.C. SKEAT, *The Birth of Codex*, London 1983, pp. 12–13; E.A. TURNER, *Greek Papyri. An Introduction*, Oxford 1968, p. 7.

be seen at the Museum in Istanbul. Behind the left shoulder of a youth, a Doric pilaster is clearly visible, again with documents placed on the capital (**Fig. 4**). Interestingly, the youth is dressed in a cloak showing the local, middle-eastern features. In his right hand he is holding an item hard to be identified: a *schedula*, a key or a blade of a sword.

Tab. 1. The Classification of Palmyrene writing utensils represented in funerary sculpture.

Total number of identified and investigated objects so far		145
More than one writing attribute		8
– stylus and tablet/ <i>schedula</i>		3
– codex and capsas/roll		5
Single Rolls		4
Tablets		57
	Wide Tablets	40
	– with inscription	3
	– with rhomboidal cut	5
	Narrow Tablets	17
	– double	4
	– with inscription	1
<i>Schedula</i>		73
	Straight <i>Schedula</i>	36
	– with ornaments	4
	– with inscription	1
	Curved <i>Schedula</i>	18
	– with inscription	2
	Double <i>Schedula</i>	19
	– with inscription	2
	– with ornaments	2
	Keys	3

The codex decorated on cover and tied up by strings and a *capsa* can also be seen on another representation, that of a boy Yarhai, son of Malku (**Fig. 5**). On another funerary stele, the *capsa* and the codex are tied with a leather string, and are carried by a servant (**Fig. 6**). The latter was shown on the left of the Doric column positioned in the center of the stele. On the capital of the column one can see the characteristic Palmyrene priestly cap, *modius*, with a wreath. Moreover, on the right, another figure is depicted, a priest Yarhai son of Yarhai. The other young man holds in his right hand a stylus with which he writes on an open polyptych tablet held in his left hand (**Fig. 7**). On the upper tablet there appear last letters of the Greek alphabet ‘ΩΨ / ΧΦ / Υ’ written from right to left, as if they were Aramaic. Apparently there is also one known female bust presented with writing attributes (**Fig. 26**).²⁰ The depicted woman holds a stylus by which she writes on an open polyptych of wax tablets just like the young man presented on **Fig. 7**.

²⁰ SMITH, Identity, Community, and State Formation, p. 213, Fig. 33. The preserved bust is apparently headless. The gender of depicted is strongly suggested by sculptural execution of hands and apparel folds which highly resemble the analogical stylistic features of another female representation, namely unveiled woman

Interestingly enough, the attributes of the next typological group, papyri rolls, are represented only on four busts. In this group, the most remarkable is a well-known representation of Marcus Julius Maximus Aristides, a citizen of Berytus, now on display in the Louvre Museum (**Fig. 8**). An open roll with Greek commemorative inscription is visible on the capital of the Doric pilaster (again this remarkable solution) situated above his left shoulder.

Representations with tablets form a much larger group. Moreover they are the oldest writing attributes that appear on Palmyrene funerary relief, taking by example the funerary stele of juvenile Haira son of Zabdilal (**Fig. 1**)²¹ and few decades older tombstone of Roman *Gaius Virius Alcimus* (**Fig. 19**). Evidently, the two varieties of tablets are represented as attributes of funerary busts: wide and narrow ones. The first type probably depicts wide wax tablets.²² They are shown as broad, rectangular forms. These tablets are always shown as held in the left hand. Some of them are decorated with square or rhomboidal cuts on the cover whereas the others have incisions which are curved one on top and one on the side. These details seem to indicate simplified representations of wax tablets combined into polyptych or codex with a decorated cover and/or partly visible tablets put inside. There is an Aramaic inscription *To Yarhai son of Yarhai* carved on one of wide tablets held by a priest (second century CE) (**Fig. 9**). Similarly, on the tablet held by a bearded man named Malku (second century CE), there is the same phrase inscribed in Aramaic.²³ The second type of tablets, the narrow ones, are found less frequently and resemble simple narrow, elongated rectangles. These are probably representations of narrow wooden tablets²⁴ or simplified and schematic representations of wide wax tablets. There also appear four representations of double narrow tablets, probably imitating the diptych.²⁵ Among them the most interesting is a bust of a man holding ritual vessels in his left hand and a two narrow tablets in his right one inscribed with a Greek inscription ΑΙΟΨ (**Fig. 13**).²⁶ This inscription is one of the rare examples of Greek appearing on funerary sculpture and its writing attributes.

In the classification of Palmyrene iconography, the most interesting and enigmatic writing attribute of Palmyrene busts is the *schedula*. Ingholt was the first to introduce that term into the classification of Palmyrene iconography. *Schedula* resembles an elongated ‘stick’, similar to a narrow tablet described above. However, what distinguishes *schedula* from tablets is their characteristic trapezoidal rather than rectangular shape. It seems possible

holding three keys with Greek and Aramaic inscriptions (**Fig. 14**). At the same time the characteristic necklace (*bullā*) could suggest that the mentioned bust depicts a girl instead of mature woman.

²¹ Approximately 100–130 CE, cf. SADURSKA, BOUNNI, *Sculptures funéraires*, cat. 16, Fig. 5.

²² CIS II, 4322; H. INGHOLT, *Inscriptions and Sculptures from Palmyra I*, *Berytus* 3, 1936, pp. 83–128; PLOUG, *Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek*, p. 255; E. WILL, *Les Palmyréniens. La Venise des Sables (I^{er} siècle avant–III^{ème} siècle après J.-C.)*, Paris 1992 [= *Les Palmyréniens*], p. 108.

²³ A. BÜLOW-JACOBSEN, *Writing materials in the Ancient World*, [in:] R.S. Bagnall (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Papyrology*, Oxford 2008 [= *Writing materials*], p. 11.

²⁴ H. INGHOLT, *Studier over Palmyrensk Skulptur*, København 1928 [= *Studier*], p. 51, PS 29.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, PS 13; SADURSKA, BOUNNI, *Sculptures funéraires*, cat. 58, Fig. 75; cat. 146, Fig. 38.

²⁶ PARLASCA, *DamMitt* 3, 1988, pp. 219–220.

that a small wooden tablet, a wide tablet, or a roll squeezed in one hand was depicted in this manner. Several known examples of *schedula* support these interpretations. First, there is a bust of Palmyrene *beneficiarius* Hairan depicted on a relief currently displayed in the Hermitage. Hairan holds a stylus in his left hand while writing with it on a *schedula* held in his right hand (**Fig. 10**). Similar representations can be seen on other Roman funerary sculptures, including a grave relief of Xantion from Syrian Zeugma²⁷ or the Sarcophagus of Muses from the Vatican Museum.²⁸ On the latter, a philosopher squeezing a roll is clearly depicted.²⁹ Finally, it is generally known that pieces of wood of similar trapezoidal shape with traces of inscription etched with a sharp tool have been used as writing boards in Graeco-Roman Egypt.³⁰

Within the group of *schedulae*, just like in the group of tablets, one can distinguish two sub-types: straight and curved. Those of the first type were sometimes decorated with engraved ornaments in the shape of letters ‘X’ or ‘II’.³¹ On one such ornament, Aramaic word ‘Grief!’ is inscribed.³² The *schedulae* of the second type are more or less bent to the left. On one of them hold by Bennuri son of Bara his name is engraved in Aramaic (**Fig. 11**).³³ According to Sadurska, curved *schedulae* are a stylized representation of keys. It is doubtful however, as keys represented in Palmyrene funerary sculpture are always L-shaped and not trapezoidal.

Double *schedulae* are similar to iconographic representations of the group described above, except for the fact that the deceased depicted in those reliefs hold two *schedulae* (**Fig. 25**). It seems it could be a simplified representation of a diptych. The most interesting example in this group is the bust of priest Ogge of the family of Ya’ut, whose double *schedula* is engraved with Aramaic inscription ‘Grief, Ogge’ (**Fig. 12**).³⁴

Keys are the last group of attributes associated with Palmyrene funerary reliefs. They are attribute to numerous female busts characteristically in the shape of letter ‘L’ with an engraved inscription. A young woman without veil for example, holds three keys in her left hand. Carved on the keys are inscriptions in Greek and Aramaic (**Fig. 14**). Both left and right keys are inscribed with Greek ‘ΛΗΝ’ and ‘ΦΗΕΛΙ’, respectively, making no apparent sense. By contrast, the middle key bears an Aramaic inscription ‘House of eternity’.³⁵ On yet another relief, a woman is shown laden with rich jewelry. She is holding a child (**Fig. 15**). On her right shoulder, a round brooch appears, pinned up with two keys and lavishly decorated with granulated pearls. The smaller, left key bears a Greek inscription ‘ΔΙΟC’, while the bigger one on the right, inscription ‘NEIKH’.³⁶

²⁷ INGHOLT, Studier, pp. 27, 124, PS 297; Id., Palmyrene Sculptures in Beirut, *Berytus* 1, 1934, pp. 32–43.

²⁸ K. PARLASCA, Zur syrischen Grabplastik der römischen Kaiserzeit, *The J. Paul Getty Journal* 8, 1980, pp. 141–142, Abb. 1.

²⁹ G. KOCH, Roman Funerary Sculpture: Catalogue of the Collection, Malibu 1988, p. 57.

³⁰ BÜLOW-JACOBSEN, Writing materials, p. 12, Fig. 1.5.

³¹ SADURSKA, BOUNNI, Sculptures funéraires, cat. 64, Fig. 101; cat. 172, Fig. 109.

³² *CIS* II, 4566.

³³ *Ibid.*, 4251; INGHOLT, Studier, p. 34.

³⁴ *CIS* II, 4323, 4323 bis et ter.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 4490.

³⁶ PARLASCA, *DamMitt* 3, 1988, pp. 217–219; PLOUG, Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, pp. 216–218.

The vast majority of monuments examined above can be dated for second or third century CE. In fact, while male busts with ritual attributes tend to disappear over time, those with writing utensils seems to increase in number (especially those with single or double *schedula*).³⁷ They come from the period of the greatest economic and political power of Palmyra. Thus, to search now for what made them meaningful for Palmyrene society will provide data portraying the contexts of writing utensils' use in times of Palmyra's greatest prosperity.

THE USE AND REPRESENTATION

The fundamental role of funerary portraiture within Palmyrene society was to represent the *nephesh* [NPŠ],³⁸ the soul of deceased. According to ancient Semitic beliefs the soul after the death was dwelling at the grave or tomb known as 'house of eternity' [BT'LM']³⁹ where it was regularly visited by relatives. The inscriptions accompanying portraits show that from the beginning of the second century CE they often become described as 'images' or 'representations' [ŠLM]. It seems they were gradually taking the role of individual portraits, though they usually provide only a distant resemblance. That is why they may be sometimes described in literature by sociological terms as 'the ideal type' or the icon.⁴⁰ From anthropological perspective they reflect the individual choices of Palmyrene inhabitants and materialize a certain types of experience and the specific kind of mentality that people once recognized and could look at.⁴¹ As such they are conceptually linked with social history of Palmyra and their form reflects the contemporary imagination of its people that made them meaningful. Consequently the Palmyrene funerary portraiture provides and outstanding amount of visual representations that reflect the cultural contexts in which the writing tools were possibly used. Considering the iconographic and epigraphic data and their overall message as well as their broader archaeological context the four types of symbolical meanings related to such a use can be singled out. They concern respectively education, civic attitudes towards Rome and Hellenism, occupation and funeral activities.

SCHOOLBOYS AND LEARNING

The cities of the Roman East hired rethors who instructed local youth in grammar and philosophy while private teachers taught children reading and writing.⁴² However, there are no literary sources that would unambiguously confirm the existence of such instructors

³⁷ COLLEDGE, *Art of Palmyra*, p. 69.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

⁴⁰ VEYNE, *Empire*, p. 348.

⁴¹ Cf. C. GEERTZ, *Art as Cultural System, Local Knowledge. Further Essays on Interpretative Anthropology*, New York 1983, pp. 94–120; R.R.R. SMITH, *Cultural choice and political identity in honorific portrait statues in the Greek East in the second century A.D.*, *JRS* 88, 1998, pp. 56–93.

⁴² W.V. HARRIS, *Literacy and Epigraphy I*, *ZPE* 52, 1983, pp. 95–103; M. SARTRE, *L'Orient romain. Provinces et sociétés provinciales en Méditerranée orientale d'Auguste aux Sévères (31 avant J.-C.–235 après J.-C.)*, Paris 1991 [= *L'Orient romain*], p. 187.

in Palmyra. What exists are visual representations and Aramaic inscriptions. For example, young Yarhai, son of Malku, holds in his left hand a polyptych with its cover decorated by a rhomboidal cut hanging on a thong and *capsa*, while in his right hand he is holding a palm leaf, virtually an attribute of the dead (**Fig. 5**). The boy is depicted wearing a long-sleeved tunic that is typical for Palmyrene youth. Young Zebida son of Taimoamed is similarly dressed. He is shown with a polyptych tied up by a strap held in his right hand while with his left he presses a rectangular tablet to his chest (**Fig. 16**). Additionally there is the recently published headless female representation with writing tools (**Fig. 26**). The *bulla* on her neck could suggest that this is a girl rather than a woman. Thus, some clue for girls practicing writing.

Evidently these reliefs indicate that on the streets of Palmyra the sight of children, or at least boys, hurrying to school with tablets tied by strings was quite common. In fact between the first and fourth century CE, schools were recognized as educational institutions within Roman Empire. On the streets of Roman cities, towns, and maybe even villages, it was usual to see children (or at least, boys) hurrying to school carrying their wax tablets.⁴³ Hence, it is quite possible that in Palmyra there were functioning schools for children.

The way in which Zebida presses a tablet to his breast by his left hand deserved for more attention. A very similar gesture can be seen on the relief depicting young Taimaha. Taimaha is shown in a local outfit, embroidered and with long puffy pants (**Fig. 17**). He is shown together with his identically dressed younger brother who presses a bird to his chest with his right hand. Additionally, the boys are holding together a bunch of grapes. The bird and the grapes were common attributes of children in Palmyrene funerary reliefs.⁴⁴ However, Taimaha, the older of the brothers, is pressing a tablet to his chest. From this observation, a second conclusion emerges: in Palmyra, writing materials could possibly became an attribute of deceased boys in general. Apparently they appear alongside the popular children attributes such as bird or leaf.

Also Yarhai, son of Bonne is pressing a tablet to his breast with his left hand although that tablet is in the form of *tabula ansata*, an original iconographic solution (**Fig. 18**). He is shown dressed in himation. Aramaic inscription on the tablet informs us that the sepulchral relief was dedicated to Yarhai by his 'tutor' [MRBYTH]. Similarly, funeral bust of Mezzabana, son of Malku, was dedicated by Anna, his guardian and 'tutor' [MRBYNH]. H. Ingholt, who studied a greater number of reliefs, observed that terms depicting tutors appear frequently.⁴⁵ Though MRBYN could mean also the legal guardians or property managers who looked after the interests of young people orphaned early in their lives, in case of Yarhai we have at least one documented example of a devoted tutor dedicating funerary portrait to his pupil. Apparently Jamblichos, the ancient author of Syrian origin living in the second century CE, mentions his tutor, who used Aramaic and Greek almost as a professional rhetor, and was familiar with languages of Mesopotamia and some

⁴³ P. VEYNE, *A History of Private Life. From Pagan Rome to Byzantium*, Cambridge-London 1996, pp. 19–20.

⁴⁴ COLLEDGE, *Art of Palmyra*, p. 69.

⁴⁵ H. INGHOLT, *Inscriptions and Sculptures from Palmyra, Berytus* 5, 1938, pp. 130–131.

‘barbarian doctrines’.⁴⁶ One cannot exclude the possibility that funerary reliefs of Yarhai and Mezzabana were funded by their tutors who were responsible for their overall education. Possessing private tutors they presumably belonged to privileged classes and could have received equally extensive education as Jamblichos himself.

The iconographic information and epigraphic data mentioned above are very important while discussing literacy and education in the Graeco-Roman world, showing that education of boys in the Roman East could occur in multilingual⁴⁷ and multicultural context. This last conclusion seems to be especially confirmed by an already-mentioned bust of a youth, now on display in the Louvre Museum (**Fig. 7**). The boy is dressed in a local tunic with long sleeves and a fringed mantle. In his right hand, he holds a stylus with which he writes on an open polyptych of tablets held in his left hand. The last letters of the Greek alphabet ‘ΩΨ/ΧΦ/Υ’ can be seen clearly. They are engraved in Aramaic order, from right to left. If this is a mistake, it is a touching one in its awkwardness, similar to student errors that we can see on the Assendelft Tablets. This relief does not document the fact that Greek was taught by professional *didaskaloi* in Palmyra like in more hellenized regions of Syria.⁴⁸ It indicates, however, that Semitic citizens of Palmyra may have wished to manifest their knowledge of Greek letters, and, presumably, their knowledge of Greek literature and culture. This leads us to yet another point in the discussion of symbolic meaning of writing materials as shown in Palmyrene funerary reliefs: the relationship between local and Graeco-Roman culture.

CITIZENS OF GREEK *POLIS* AND OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE

though Aramaic language remained in use in Palmyra, doubtless it has assimilated some Greek and Roman words.⁴⁹ Beginning with the middle of the first century CE, the citizens commonly described themselves in bilingual inscriptions preserved in public, honorific contexts. However one of the oldest, private funerary reliefs represents persons of foreign origin. Apparently it shows the busts of two Roman citizens: *Gaius Virius Alcimus* and his wife *Viria Phoibe* (**Fig. 19**). Alcimus was an agent of a Roman *publicanus*. He is actually mentioned in the Tax Law on the occasion of receiving instructions from the governor of Syria in the years 67–69 CE. He is also mentioned in an incomplete inscription stored in the Museum of Palmyra. It informs the reader in three languages: Latin, Greek and Aramaic that it comes from the tomb jointly built in 56/57 CE by two freedmen: *Caius Virius Alcimus* and *Titus Statilius Hermes*. Hermes was probably a freedman of another *publicanus* mentioned in the Tax Law, who in 18/19 CE received an order from Germanicus to collect charges in Roman coins.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ F. MILLAR, *The Roman Near East 31 BC–AD 337*, London 1994 [= *The Roman Near East*], pp. 497–498.

⁴⁷ Cf. J.W. Adams, M. Janse, S. Swain (Eds), *Bilingualism in Ancient Society: Language, Contact and the Written Text*, Oxford 2002.

⁴⁸ SARTRE, *L’Orient romain*, p. 136.

⁴⁹ COLLEDGE, *Art of Palmyra*, p. 20; MILLAR, *The Roman Near East*, p. 553.

⁵⁰ M. GAWLIKOWSKI, *Deux publicains et leur tombeau*, *Syria* 75, 1998, pp. 145–151.

Alcimus was a freedman who became wealthy while serving in Roman administration and after gaining freedom and Roman citizenship remained in Syria. His funerary portrait has been executed very carefully on limestone plaque which served as the closing of a *loculus*. Interestingly, the oval top derives from the specific feature of earlier native free-standing funerary steles. Below the busts there is also a Greek inscription engraved in a *tabula ansata*. In his left hand Alcimus holds a tablet. It is doubtful, however, that the tablet was supposed to reflect how sophisticated his education was. Rather, it is probably an attribute of a low-rank officer in Roman administration. His duties certainly required some degree of writing ability, as well as the capacity to keep accounts. In other words, they required ‘everyday writing’ skill. This was described by Roger Bagnall who distinguished within Graeco-Roman society two areas related to literacy and researched them separately. First was the ability to read literary works; the second was the ability to practice ‘everyday writing’. The latter was necessary to operate within the existing contemporary legal and administrative-type institutions and to conduct business and family affairs.⁵¹ Buried in the tomb decorated with a Latin commemorative inscription and shown on relief which seems to reflect Roman influence though bearing native features, Alcimus seems to express satisfaction with his position of a Roman official and his pride of acquiring the Roman citizenship. Similar messages could be found on funerary reliefs placed in Roman catacombs on the eve of the first century CE. Most of them depict the deceased belonging to lower social strata, many of them freedmen engaged in typical everyday activities including writing business letters and accounting.⁵² Frontal convention and large eyes are characteristic for this kind of popular Roman art.⁵³ Alcimus looks like so many administrative and municipal officials, and less refined ordinary individuals in every province of the Empire.

Besides the Roman administration, the army was a major institution of Romanization in Syria.⁵⁴ This observation makes even Colledge to assume that Palmyrene funerary sculpture developed under the influence of Roman soldiers stationed in the oasis.⁵⁵ There is no doubt that service in auxiliary troops introduced individual servicemen to Roman culture. In occupied provinces Roman army organized the necessary infrastructure and the colonies of veterans who settled in the army’s wake contributed to rapid urbanization of these areas. A certain Hairan (**Fig. 10**) emphasizes in his Aramaic inscription that he served as *beneficiarius* in auxiliary forces stationed in Palmyra. This is a rather unique piece of

⁵¹ R.S. BAGNALL, *Everyday Writing in the Graeco-Roman East*, Berkeley-Los Angeles-London 2011, p. 179; W.V. HARRIS, *Ancient literacy*, Cambridge-London 1989 [= *Ancient literacy*], pp. 26–27.

⁵² For example on one of Roman reliefs found in Ostia we see a female owner of a butcher shop engaged in preparing accounting notes on a wax tablet while her slave is chopping the meat, cf. K. SEETAH, *Multidisciplinary Approach to Romano-British Cattle Butchery*, [in:] M. Maltby (Ed.), 9th ICAZ Conference, Durham 2002, *Integrating Zooarchaeology*, Durham 2005, p. 116, Fig. 13.4.

⁵³ In his discussion Veyne (VEYNE, *Empire*, p. 372) gives fundamental references to R. Bianchi Bandinelli and R.R.R. Smith. This issue has been also discussed in several papers of K. Parlasca, e.g. K. PARLASCA, *Zur syrischen Kunst der frühen Kaiserzeit*, *AA* 1967, pp. 547–568; ID., *Probleme palmyrenischer Grabreliefs. Chronologie und Interpretation*, [in:] *Palmyre. Bilan et perspectives. Colloque de Strasbourg 18–20 octobre 1973*, Strasbourg 1976, pp. 33–43.

⁵⁴ K. BUTCHER, *Roman Syria and the Near East*, London 2003 [= *Roman Syria*], p. 399.

⁵⁵ COLLEDGE, *Art of Palmyra*, p. 239.

information found among Palmyrene funerary art and inscriptions.⁵⁶ The bust of Hairan, moreover, is dated from the second half of the second century CE. Hairan is dressed in a coat with fringes, displaying oriental features, which was probably a type of dress worn by Palmyrene camel archers. In his right hand he is holding a stylus with which he seems to be writing on the *schedula* held in his left hand. This is clearly an indication of functions associated with Roman structures of military administration, and the ability to read and write at least Greek was doubtless a skill necessary to fulfill his duties.⁵⁷ Besides the bust of Alcimius the funerary portrait of Hairan is an excellent proof that common members of the Graeco-Roman society, often of local origin, used handwriting in fulfilling their daily chores on the fringes of Empire world.

The links with Roman structures of power seems to be communicated by funerary relief of *Marcus Julius Maximos Aristides* (**Fig. 8**). According to the bilingual, Greek and Palmyrene inscription he was buried in Palmyra in the second half of the second century CE. It is proudly underlined in Greek on the open roll situated on the Doric pilaster visible behind his bust that he was a citizen of Berytus, and the father of a woman whose Roman name was Lucilla, wife of a Pertinax. The city of Berytus (Beirut) was the only colony of Roman veterans in Syria since the times of Augustus. In fact *Civitas Berytensium* was indeed a true island of Romanization in the whole region. As a Roman citizen bearing Greek cognomen Aristides probably intended to communicate that he is literate and well-educated, and that as full citizen he is able to avail himself of the achievements of Greek rhetors as well as Roman lawyers. Contrary to Alcimius and Hairan, Aristides is presented in a more refined, Hellenistic style, and seems to claim not only Roman citizenship but to aspire to the Greek ideal of a noble man who was able to show his education and who practiced civic virtues.⁵⁸

Another very interesting example of the amalgamation of Graeco-Roman and local cultural elements is offered by a bust of a bearded man dressed in tunic and toga tied at the waist (**Fig. 20**). The man wears a diadem with an oval stone on his head while in his right hand he holds a Roman ritual vessel and in his left hand the *schedula*. On his left side one can see a Doric pilaster. There is a folded material placed on its capital and above it, a laurel wreath with an oval elongated stone in the middle. It seems likely that this is a bust of a person related to the imperial cult as indicated by the hand-held Roman ritual vessel and the diadem.⁵⁹ The toga, unique in the art of Palmyra, implies Roman citizenship. It was the only proper dress for a citizen of Rome on solemn occasions and wearing

⁵⁶ Contrary to Greek or Roman ones, which include the deceased's profession or public function Palmyrene inscriptions contained mostly information about ancestors.

⁵⁷ About military administration at Vindolanda cf. A.K. BOWMAN, *Life and Letters on the Roman Frontier. Vindolanda and Its People*, London 2003. About writing at Roman Army at Dura Europos cf. J. AUSTIN, *Writers and Writing in the Roman Army at Dura-Europos*, unpublished PhD thesis, University of Birmingham 2010.

⁵⁸ However, the inscription above the bust of Aristides is engraved also in Aramaic. It is possible that Palmyrene workshops customarily engraved Aramaic inscriptions on reliefs of Greek and Hellenized residents. Rich epigraphic material confirms that outside of Beirut, Roman army ranks in Syria were expressed in Greek and Aramaic (MILLAR, *The Roman Near East*, p. 527)

⁵⁹ K. PARLASCA, *Das Verhältnis der Palmyrenischen Grabplastik zur Römischen Porträtkunst*, *RM* 92, 1985, pp. 347–348; ID., *DamMitt* 3, 1988, p. 221.

it emphasized his privileged legal status. The diadem resembles similar head decorations depicted on the statues of Greek notables of Asia Minor, connected to the imperial cult. The bust itself comes from the third century CE when all citizens of Palmyra received Roman citizenship. It seems to be a manifestation of the progressive Romanization of the city, and of the process of adaptation to the Roman institutions by its residents.

The *schedula* could be in that particular context a sign of further cultural evolution. It seems obvious that starting with the second century CE, Roman and Hellenistic elements of culture merged and intermingled in the Roman East. The Greek ideal of an educated man displaying civic virtues has successfully combined with the feeling of pride in being a Roman citizen.⁶⁰ Hence, this example of funerary bust from the third century CE shows not an ordinary freedman who may have been a bit crude and wanted to demonstrate his newly acquired citizenship, but a more sophisticated Roman citizen who is aware of the Oriental and Hellenic traditions he embodies.

At the same time, some notables of Asia Minor did hold the rolls as signs of their literary sophistication. Doubtless it was a manifestation of Hellenism rather than *Romanitas* and relates to the great tradition of *paideia*.⁶¹ This observation brings up a question about the extent to which Palmyrene funerary reliefs reflect a tendency to display a contemporary Hellenistic cultural elements. The latter ones developed by intellectual movements of second and third sophistic were quite often reflected in figurative arts of East Empire and evidently popular in Roman Syria.⁶² In Palmyra at least since the times of the Flavians the city was organized in a Greek mode. While discussing its architecture Paul Veyne observed that its society tried to adopt not only the forms of Hellenistic art, but also its spirit.⁶³ Undoubtedly, the elites of Palmyra absorbed much of Hellenistic culture as can be seen in remains of their refined sarcophagi.⁶⁴ But can we say that Palmyrene funerary reliefs are portraying common citizens of that city who were involved in public life of their *polis* and who received sophisticated classical education which they clearly wished to demonstrate?

The two observations could possibly support a positive answer to the above question. First, evidently the most popular dress worn by the deceased and portrayed on their funerary representations, is the himation. This is a standard civil dress of a citizen of a Greek *polis*. Second, a clear manifestation of Hellenistic aspirations of the part of residents of Palmyra

⁶⁰ Just like in case of statues of notables of Greek cities of Asia Minor from the second century, who were typically portrayed in togas. Cf. R.R.R. SMITH, Cultural choice and political identity in honorific portrait statues in the Greek East in the second century A.D., *JRS* 88, 1998, pp. 56–93. Apparently himation seems to be also popular (*ibid.*, Pls VII.2–3, XI.1), with diadems of imperial cult as well as rolls or capsas (*ibid.*, Pl. VI.1).

⁶¹ Cf. HARRIS, Ancient literacy, p. 273; VEYNE, Empire, p. 210.

⁶² Cf. E. WILL, La Syrie à l'époque hellénistique et romaine: mille ans de vie intellectuelle et artistique, [*in:*] J.-M. Dentzer, W. Orthmann (Eds), Archéologie et histoire de la Syrie II. La Syrie de l'époque achéménide à l'avènement de l'Islam, Saarbrücken 1989, pp. 567–580; K. STEBNICKA, P. JANISZEWSKI, Grecy sofisci w czasach drugiej i trzeciej sofistyki, [*in:*] E. Wipszycka, T. Derda (Eds), Chrześcijaństwo u schyłku starożytności. Studia źródłoznawcze V, Kraków 2004, pp. 11–152.

⁶³ VEYNE, Empire, pp. 351–352.

⁶⁴ Cf. D. WIELGOSZ, Funeralia Palmyrena, *Studia Palmyreńskie* 10, 1997, pp. 69–77.

who claimed to be Greek, or wished to be perceived as Greek,⁶⁵ is visible on representation of a boy writing with his stylus on open polyptych (**Fig. 7**). He is writing the last letters of the Greek alphabet in Aramaic order, but that awkwardness paradoxically expresses to the full the naïve desire to be perceived as a member of highly esteemed Greek culture.

Similarly, the busts of Zabdateh-Zenobios, son of Dionysius (**Fig. 2**) and his father Dionysius, son of Zabdateh (**Fig. 3**) might have expressed Hellenistic aspirations. On the pilaster placed behind Zabdateh-Zenobios' left arm one can see a roll, folded and tied with a ribbon, and a codex with a decorated cover. Dionysius holds a wide tablet in his left hand and Yarhai, the brother of Dionysius, handles a double *schedula* in his hand. His relief bears a bilingual inscription.⁶⁶ The busts of all three members of the family seem to be carefully executed, probably in a Greek workshop. On the other hand, the bust of Zabdateh, son of Hennibel who was the father of Dionysius and of Yarhai and co-founder of the hypogeum of Shalamallat, was executed in a much more conservative local workshop and no writing utensils were attached as his attributes here. According to Sadurska, the codex and the roll reflected the privileged status of the family.⁶⁷ All three reliefs have an engraved bilingual inscription, in Greek and Aramaic. And Semitic name of Zabdateh has been translated into its Greek equivalent. The name of his father is displayed in Greek, the use of which seems to emphasize his local pedigree. Bilingual inscriptions, names of the deceased, the fact that they are descendants of an important family, as well as their attributes may have indicated the fact that they were members of the Hellenized higher strata of Palmyrene society who wished to manifest their sophisticated intellectual level. It is noteworthy that the busts were preserved in tomb where they were accessible only to family. Obviously the Greek inscriptions and visual representations of books were not used to inform or impress the strangers but to highlight the intimate feeling of family pride due to particular degree of the Hellenization.

However, reliefs of Zabdateh-Zenobios family also bear Aramaic inscriptions. Behind the right arm of Dionysius who holds a *schedula*, one can see a wreath with medallion, and, behind the bust of Zabdateh-Zenobios, a curtain pinned up to palm leaves. One can recognize a local symbol of priesthood in the medallion and a religious meaning in the curtain, an acknowledged Palmyrene symbol of the afterworld.⁶⁸ This proves that despite a sense of belonging to the Hellenistic culture, citizens of Palmyra wished to retain and perhaps even stress their local beliefs whose importance is again stressed by private context.

It seems that in Palmyra, the Greek language and alphabet have been incorporated into local culture rather than being a tool of Hellenization.⁶⁹ Moreover, the wealthiest and probably the most Hellenized inhabitants of Palmyra were not buried in ordinary *loculi*,

⁶⁵ F. MILLAR, Greek and Native Cultures in the Syrian Region, *JJS*, 29, 1978, pp. 2–7; SARTRE, L'Orient romain, p. 313.

⁶⁶ SADURSKA, BOUNNI, Sculptures funéraires, cat. 202, Fig. 57; K. TANABE, Sculpture of Palmyra 1, Tokyo 1986 [= Sculpture 1], Pl. 289.

⁶⁷ SADURSKA, BOUNNI, Sculptures funéraires, cat. 295, Fig. 91.

⁶⁸ COLLEDGE, Art of Palmyra, p. 63.

⁶⁹ MILLAR, The Roman Near East, p. 597.

but in the sarcophagi, brought in from outside or carved in the oasis.⁷⁰ Thus, the Palmyrene funerary portraits seem to reflect the local artistic solutions and local beliefs despite the obvious architectural and decorative Graeco-Roman influences.⁷¹ In this way, local religious traits were symbolically expressed in funerary sculpture of the ordinary citizens. However, it seems that the thesis of Veyne concerning Hellenistic aspirations of the Palmyrene society cannot be confirmed by material collected and analyzed for purposes of this study. The funerary busts mentioned above are just a small group of exceptional examples. No Palmyrene citizen is shown on his funerary relief in a manner so clearly Hellenic as Xantion, a citizen of Zeugma, in North Syria.⁷² Greek inscription on his relief clearly confirms his status as a citizen of the *polis*. It was a vibrant local culture that gave a character to Palmyra. Therefore, the writing attributes displayed on the Palmyrene funerary sculpture cannot be considered just as manifestation of Hellenism. Their symbolical message does not prove the assumption that the citizens of Palmyra have commonly adopted the Hellenistic culture and the books and tablets which the deceased held had to express the fact that they belonged to the upper classes, living idly and having free time to study. On the contrary, they generally represent and express other aspects of Palmyrene society: a community of adventurous merchants, to a certain degree Romanized but at the same time attached to their native religion. To prove that point the contexts of visual representations concerning writing tools associated with everyday works and religious beliefs will be discussed below.

MERCHANTS AND ADMINISTRATORS, CAMEL DRIVERS AND MEHARISTES⁷³

The tablet held by Gaius Virius Alcimus can be interpreted as example of an attribute depicting everyday writing: a local notable used writing materials while performing his routine daily activities. A certain Taimai, accompanying his deceased wife Aliyat, has been shown in a similar manner (**Fig. 22**). His relief, dating from the late first or early second century CE, has been executed in a workshop, the artwork of which displays much more local character. Exactly like *Viria Phoibe* and almost identically dressed, Aliyat is holding a distaff and a spindle in her left hand. Taimai, similarly to Alcimus, is wearing a himation and in the left hand, holds a wide tablet. The tablet is large, rectangular, with a characteristic rhomboidal cutting engraved on its cover. The relief is accompanied with only one Aramaic inscription.⁷⁴ A much larger group of reliefs dating from that same time period shows men with tablets, both wide and narrow.⁷⁵

It is possible that the relief of Alcimus was influenced by popular Roman art depicting middle and lower social strata. This is so far the earliest attested relief which has a tablet

⁷⁰ Cf. *supra*, n. 61.

⁷¹ BUTCHER, *Roman Syria*, p. 308.

⁷² PARLASCA, *The J. Paul Getty Journal* 8, 1980, pp. 141–142, Abb. 1.

⁷³ The French term *mehariste* describes a soldier of the camel mounted corps (e.g. WILL, *Les Palmyréniens*, pp. 99–102).

⁷⁴ *CIS* II, 4412.

⁷⁵ In the period between 200–273 the tablets virtually disappear being replaced by *schedula* and double *schedula* (COLLEDGE, *Art of Palmyra*, p. 69).

as an attribute, so it seems possible that it is the first to set a style in the way male representations have been depicted. Presumably, the men portrayed on the reliefs belonged mostly to the emerging class of Palmyrene entrepreneurs of local origin, the group which included rich administrators of family properties, merchants, representatives of craft assemblies or less significant members of the City Council. In funerary reliefs, they were always portrayed in himation, the urban civil costume of the Roman East. These people represented the middle-classes of the growing Empire, so fascinating subject of study for contemporary social historians.⁷⁶ Daily work performed by members of that group required the skills of reading and writing and they were likely to use them in keeping archives consisting of many tablets which they used to record their daily transactions and contracts, just like the Pompeian banker, Caecilius Jucundus.⁷⁷ This fact that they possessed such skills is reflected in their funerary sculpture.

In this context the bust of Yarhai son of Yarhai seems very interesting. In his left hand Yarhai holds a tablet with Aramaic inscription ‘To Yarhai, (son of) Yarhai. Grief’ (**Fig. 9**).⁷⁸ In the text of this inscription, the Aramaic starting formula for letters is combined with the word ‘Grief’. The latter is the typical farewell formula found on Palmyrene funerary inscriptions.⁷⁹ It seems that the late Yarhai was bidden farewell by phrases of everyday writing engraved on his writing attribute together with religious formulas of funeral rites. Furthermore it appears that also the stunning female representation (**Fig. 26**) virtually depicts the ‘everyday writing’ practiced by an unknown Palmyrene woman or girl during her everyday chores whatever they could be; an excellent example and evidence of female literacy in local community of Roman Syria.

A fascinating example of both original message and artistic solution reflected in Palmyrene funerary sculpture can be found in Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek. On the relief dated from the second half of the second century CE one can see a bust of a bearded man dressed in a himation (**Fig. 23**). He holds the *schedula* in his left hand while above his right arm one can see a camel’s head. This is certainly a man who was in some way related to the caravan trade. Perhaps a small entrepreneur, a *mehariste* or a camel-driver? After all, Palmyra was the city *where the people of low birth are publicly known due to their close links with caravan trade*.⁸⁰ And, apart from the great caravans set out towards the Persian Gulf every year, individual Palmyrene traders were also undertaking expeditions closer home, at their own risk and expense. Some dared to take to sea: one such entrepreneur asked to picture a ship on his sarcophagus. One can still see the square sails and the spur used as a defense against pirates.⁸¹ In 157 CE a man called Yarhai, who ‘loved his homeland’ appeared to be an important person in Palmyra because at least twelve monuments have

⁷⁶ VEYNE, *Empire*, pp. 117–162.

⁷⁷ *CIL* IV, I, 3340; cf. J. ANDREAU, *Banking and Business in the Roman World*, Cambridge 1999.

⁷⁸ *CIS* II, 4607.

⁷⁹ Cf. SADURSKA, BOUNNI, *Sculptures funéraires*, *pass.* (several inscriptions engraved on funerary plaques published in individual positions of catalogue).

⁸⁰ J.-B. YON, *Les notables de Palmyre*, Beirut 2002, p. 102.

⁸¹ WILL, *Les Palmyréniens*, pp. 78–80.

been erected in the city to honor him. Yarhai has received a monument from merchants returning from ‘Scythia’, that is the Indus region, in *the ship of Honainu, the son of Honainu the son of Haddudan, because he helped and supported them with great zeal*.⁸²

A few more representations of caravan merchants are portrayed with the writing attributes. They can be distinguished from the Ny Carlsberg bust by their different apparel. It seems that the ‘urban’ merchants were rather presented in himation, while the ‘men of the desert’ were depicted in long-sleeved tunics and cloaks, which were sometimes decorated with a fringe or embroidery. Presumably, one of them was the young man mourned by his brother. On his funerary relief, he is holding a whip and a *schedula* (**Fig. 24**). The whip was undoubtedly an attribute of a camel-driver or a caravan guide.⁸³ But why do these men hold writing utensils in their left hands?

As a matter of course, the expeditions to the Persian Gulf or to India were difficult, laborious and risky ventures. Attendants, goods, and animals had to be assembled, capital, proper organization, and proper management assured.⁸⁴ Apparently it is hard to imagine that organization of such projects could proceed without the use of appropriate documents, or correspondence or operating accounts. We know from Safaitic inscriptions that people of desert were literate.⁸⁵ There are also contracts from Dura Europos written in Palmyrene Aramaic script which luckily have also survived.⁸⁶ Tangible proof of literacy of desert’s inhabitants now confirmed by visual message of their tombstones.

To recapitulate it has to be said that the inhabitants of Palmyra, as well as ‘people of the desert’ seemed to be quite inventive while practicing their literacy.⁸⁷ Even a piece of plaster or of broken glass could have been used as writing material.⁸⁸ For example, on the wall of one of the tower tombs in Palmyra an unknown resident has compiled, in Aramaic, a list of his earnings: during one month he received 2236 denars as income on loans made, it seems, at thirty percent.⁸⁹ In fact, a typical Palmyrene entrepreneur could be a knight, a warrior, or a Sheikh recognized by the tribes who inhabited the territory of Palmyra and the surrounding desert.⁹⁰ The discussed visual and epigraphic evidence shows that he moreover spoke and wrote in Aramaic, and possibly he simultaneously knew some Greek. Whether he was ‘interested in the wide world’, as Paul Veyne would like to see

⁸² H. SEYRIG, Inscription relative au commerce maritime de Palmyre, *Annuaire de l’Institut de philologie et d’histoire* 4, 1936, pp. 397–402; H. SEYRIG, *Scripta varia*, BAH 125, Paris 1985, pp. 259–264. Cf. also VEYNE, *Empire*, p. 279.

⁸³ SADURSKA, BOUNNI, *Sculptures funéraires*, cat. 144, Fig. 81.

⁸⁴ VEYNE, *Empire*, p. 281; WILL, *Les Palmyréniens*, pp. 63–68; J.-B. YON, *Remarques sur une famille caravanère à Palmyre*, *Syria* 75, 1998, p. 153.

⁸⁵ SARTRE, *L’Orient romain*, pp. 314–315. Cf. M.C.A. MACDONALD, *Nomads and the Hawrān in the Late Hellenistic and Roman Periods: A Reassessment of the Epigraphic Evidence*, *Syria* 70/3–4, 1993, pp. 303–403.

⁸⁶ COTTON, COCKLE, MILLAR, *JRS* 85, 1995, pp. 220–221.

⁸⁷ MACDONALD, *Syria* 70/3–4, 1993, p. 304; VEYNE, *Empire*, p. 281.

⁸⁸ VEYNE, *loc. cit.*

⁸⁹ M. GAWLIKOWSKI, *Les comptes d’un homme d’affaires dans une tour funéraire à Palmyre*, *Semitica* 36, 1966, p. 87. The article has also been discussed by VEYNE, *Empire*, p. 281.

⁹⁰ VEYNE, *Empire*, p. 282. This observation is supported by earlier accounts of E. WILL, *Marchands et chefs de caravanes à Palmyre*, *Syria* 34, 1957, p. 262 and YON, *Syria* 75, 1998, p. 153.

it,⁹¹ or just knew how to move around, being typical representative of the social *milieu* of Palmyra, he was undoubtedly literate and needed this skill to carry out his business in daily routines.

TOMB OWNERS AND PRIESTS

It has been suggested long time ago that the tablets and *schedulae*, as attributes of male busts, can depict documents which show legal title to graves.⁹² Inscriptions on the doorways of tombs typically inform about the fact that some of the *loculi* were transferred or sold to families not connected with the tomb founders. These types of acts would probably require proper legal documentation and in Roman times, it was customary to prepare them on wax tablets.⁹³ It is possible that the very fact of founding a family tomb required preparation of similar documents as well. This means that rather than intentional manifestations of ‘everyday writing’, the writing attributes may, in fact, depict here legal acts connected with receiving title to the grave (even though they simultaneously prove the fact that such materials were used in conducting legal affairs). Of course, this observation does not apply to all representations described above. There is no doubt that all reliefs of schoolboys actually show the boys with tablets used for study. Moreover, the *beneficiarius* Hairan is shown in the act of writing with his *stylus* on the document that he might have used while performing his daily duties as a military administrator. It seems possible however, that *Gaius Virius Alcimus* holds a legal title in his left hand.

Otherwise the tablets and *schedulae* shown on funerary reliefs of the Palmyrene dead could have been of some religious significance.⁹⁴ Take by example the funerary relief of priest Yarhai son of Yarhai, with inscription engraved on a tablet mentioned above (**Fig. 9**). Another one is that of certain Malku, son of Ogga who holds a tablet with his name engraved in Aramaic.⁹⁵ Also on *schedulae*, Aramaic inscriptions can be found. Narqis, son of Shalman, holds a *schedula* bearing the inscription ‘Grief’.⁹⁶ Another formula ‘Grief, Ogge’ appears at the dual *schedula* held by the priest Ogge, son of Yarhai (**Fig. 12**).⁹⁷ By contrast, the two narrow tablets appearing in the left hand of a mature bearded man with a ritual vessel in his right hand bears a Greek inscription ‘ΑΙΟΥΨ’ (**Fig. 13**). This may be an abbreviation of the words ‘αἰών οὐψις’, which could be understood to mean ‘eternity’ and ‘vision’. It could also be an abbreviation of the term ‘αἰ (ὄνοσ) οὐψ (ις)’, ‘a vision of eternity’, although both these translations are questionable.⁹⁸ As already stated above those phrases and abbreviations were inevitably part of Palmyrene funerary culture.

⁹¹ VEYNE, *Empire*, p. 285.

⁹² INGHOLT, *Berytus* 1, 1934, p. 33.

⁹³ Cf. E.A. MEYER, *Legitimacy and law in the Roman world: tabulae in Roman belief and practice*, Cambridge 2004.

⁹⁴ Apparently it has been suggested that until the seizure of the city by Aurelian, Palmyrene religion seemed to be quite vivid and dynamic and they gave shape to the specific nature of the local culture (PARLASCA, *RM* 92, 1985, p. 115).

⁹⁵ INGHOLT, *Studier*, p. 51.

⁹⁶ *CIS* II, 4566.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 4323, 4323 bis et ter.

⁹⁸ PARLASCA, *DamMitt* 3, 1988, pp. 219–220.

Last but not least the two busts of women holding keys could shed some light on the discussion of possible religious meaning of Palmyrene writing attributes. The first bust (**Fig. 14**), is the famous statue of a woman with her head uncovered. On two of her three keys the Greek inscriptions ‘ΛΗΝ’ and ‘ΦΗΕΛΙ’ appear, both difficult to understand.⁹⁹ By contrast, the middle key bears Aramaic inscription: BT ‘LM’ (‘House of Eternity’).¹⁰⁰ The second bust, shows a woman in veil, with a child behind her right shoulder (**Fig. 15**). Two keys are pinned to her brooch bearing Greek inscriptions ‘ΔΙΟC’ and ‘ΝΕΙΚΗ’.¹⁰¹ The Greek inscription engraved on the second relief could be translated as ‘victory of Zeus’. The term ‘House of Eternity’ is for sure related to local after-life beliefs. One may wonder if Zeus mentioned in the second inscription is a reference to the Graeco-Roman deity, or simply a Greek translation of the name Bel. It has been suggested keys pinned up to brooches, with engraved inscriptions, could represent iconographic attributes of the Palmyrene priestesses.¹⁰² This hypothesis is difficult to accept. There are no literary, epigraphic or archaeological evidences that could confirm that stipulation. Whatever the answer, just like the female representation of woman with stylus and open poliptych (**Fig. 26**), the mentioned sculptures could be virtually seen as evidence of the fact that Palmyrene women were literate. Presumably the purpose of keys with engraved inscriptions was simply to communicate their everyday use in sepulchral contexts, for instance opening the monumental limestone doors of the underground tombs while visiting their dear departed. And the last ones, as mentioned above, were quite often depicted manifesting the legal documents which gave them the right to rest forever in their tombs, literally the ‘Houses of Eternity’. The last phrase is mentioned both on keys and numerous commemorative inscriptions placed in the tombs. That coincidence seems rather to prove the practical use of the writing attributes in Palmyra instead of its hypothetical spiritual one.

CONCLUSION

The Palmyrene funerary busts provide an outstanding documentation of images depicting writing tools used in Roman East. The abundant number of funerary representations with writing attributes implies a degree of statistical importance. It seems that there was some sort of educational institutions at Palmyra and the skill of ‘everyday writing’ was essential in carrying out daily activities, both civic and mercantile. It was also practiced in legal and religious proceedings relating to funerary rites. Moreover the production of male busts with writing materials seems to have increased in number with time (especially those with *schedula*, single or double). This broad representation of writing attributes in funerary sculpture of Palmyra provides new arguments in the discussion on literacy in the ancient world, or at least in Roman Syria. Funerary reliefs examined in this study are mostly representations of commoners who represent middle strata of the Roman provincial

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 217–219; PLOUG, Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, pp. 216–218.

¹⁰⁰ *CIS* II, 4490.

¹⁰¹ PARLASCA, *DamMitt* 3, 1988, p. 217; TANABE, *Sculpture* 1, Pl. 359.

¹⁰² PARLASCA, *DamMitt* 3, 1988, p. 219.

society. Consequently, it seems that the ability to use Aramaic and Greek alphabets was not uncommon. What is more, the ability to read and write in both languages was probably fairly widespread throughout the territory of Roman Syria. Hence the data presented in this study supplements the theory of an inverted pyramid of literacy in the ancient world¹⁰³ and provides new information about ‘everyday writing’ skills within Semitic communities of the Roman East. Furthermore the documented multilingualism and use of more than one alphabet reveals both regional cultural dispositions and the changes effected by multicultural nature and exchanges of Graeco-Roman East. It seems that the process of ‘Romanization’ penetrated the private sphere of local artistic funerary production, however behind it the local socio/cultural codes have been still vividly functioning. Complex local identities flourished within this multicultural social *milieu* and this is why the iconographic attributes described in this study serve as cultural manifestations of literacy, both Aramaic and Greek as a schoolboy, a citizen of Greek *polis* and of the Roman Empire, a commoner using writing skills in everyday life or participant in local religious and funerary rites and user of legal documents. Evidently the analysis of funerary busts with writing attributes can enable us to understand more precisely the social contexts of cultural forces that once expanded in the region and were symbolically expressed in local art.

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¹⁰³ HARRIS, *ZPE* 52, 1983, pp. 109–110.

CATALOGUE

All photos not to scale.

1. Haira son of Zabdilah holding a wide tablet.
 Palmyra, Palmyra Museum, inv. no. A1241/6406.
 SADURSKA, BOUNNI, *Sculptures funéraires*, cat. 16, Fig. 5.



2. Zenobios-Zabdateh, son of Dionysius with polyptych and roll behind. Palmyra, Palmyra Museum, inv. no. 1760/6584.

SADURSKA, BOUNNI, *Sculptures funéraires*, cat. 205, Fig. 91;
 TANABE, *Sculpture 1*, Pl. 290.

3. Dionysius, son of Zabdateh holding a wide tablet.
 Palmyra, Palmyra Museum, inv. no. 1750/6574.

SADURSKA, BOUNNI, *Sculptures funéraires*, cat. 204, Fig. 90;
 TANABE, *Sculpture 1*, Pl. 289.





4. Unknown young man with polptych and roll behind as well as a *schedula* in his left hand. Istanbul, Istanbul Arkeoloji Müzesi, inv. no. 3793.

COLLEDGE, *Art of Palmyra*, Fig. 80.

5. Yarhai son of Malku holding codex and capsa. Palmyra, Hypogeum of Bôlhâ (no. 7), Southeast Necropolis, gallery 4, loculus 3.

SADURSKA, BOUNNI, *Sculptures funéraires*, cat. 81, Fig. 9; TANABE, *Sculpture 1*, Pl. 214.



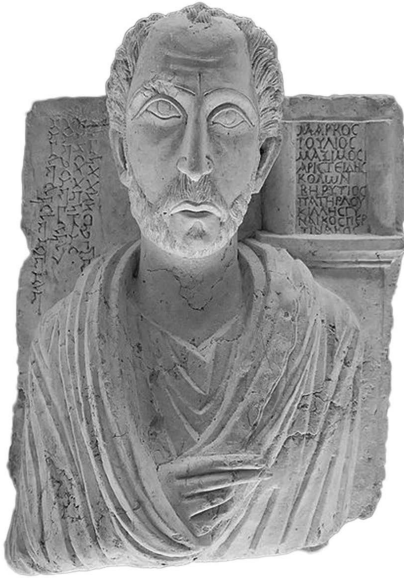
6. Servant of priest Yarhai son of Yarhai holding codex and capsa. Copenhagen, Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, inv. no. 1024.

CIS II, 4322; INGHOLT, *Berytus 2*, 1935, pp. 73–74, Pl. XXXIII/2; PLOUG, *Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek*, cat. 126, pp. 255–257; WILL, *Les Palmyréniens*, p. 108.



7. Unknown boy holding stylus and polyptych with Greek inscription. Paris, Musée du Louvre, inv. no. AO 18174.

COLLEDGE, *Art of Palmyra*, pp. 69, 252; J. DENTZER-FEYDY, J. TEIXIDOR, *Les antiquités de Palmyre au Musée du Louvre, Réunion des musées nationaux (Catalogue commenté des pièces de Palmyre conservées au musée du Louvre accompagné de notices sur l'histoire et l'art de Palmyre)*, Paris 1993 [= *Les antiquités de Palmyre*], p. 228; PARLASCA, *DamMitt* 3, 1988, pp. 215–216, Pl. 45a.



8. Marcus Iulius Maximos Aristides with roll bearing Greek inscription behind. Paris, Musée du Louvre, inv. no. AO 1556.

CIS II, 4401; COLLEDGE, *Art of Palmyra*, pp. 68, 225, 252; DENTZER-FEYDY, TEIXIDOR, *Les antiquités de Palmyre*, p. 162.

9. Priest Yarhai son of Yarhai holding a wide tablet with Aramaic inscription. Paris, Musée du Louvre, inv. no. AO 6211.

INGHOLT, *Studier*, PS 245, pp. 118–119; *CIS* II, 4607; DENTZER-FEYDY, TEIXIDOR, *Les antiquités de Palmyre*, p. 216.





10. *Beneficiarius* Hairan holding stylus and *schedula*. St. Petersburg, Hermitage Museum, inv. no. 8840.

CIS II, 4292; INGHOLT, *Studier*, pp. 39–40; PARLASCA, *DamMitt* 3, 1988.

11. Bennuri son of Bara holding curved *schedula* with Aramaic inscription. Paris, Musée du Louvre, inv. no. AO 2201.

CIS II, 4251; INGHOLT, *Studier*, p. 34.



12. Priest Ogge son of Yarhai holding double *schedula* with Aramaic inscription. Paris, Musée du Louvre, inv. no. AO 2199.

CIS II, 4323, Tab. XXXVIII; 4323 bis et ter, Tabs XXXVI, XXXVIII; DENTZER-FEYDY, TEIXIDOR, *Les antiquités de Palmyre*, p. 183.

13. Bearded man holding two narrow tablets with Greek inscription. Private collection.

PARLASCA, *DamMitt* 3, 1988, pp. 219–220.



14. Unveiled woman holding three keys with Greek and Aramaic Inscriptions. Copenhagen, Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, inv. no. 1065.

CIS II, 4490; R. DU MESNIL DU BUISSON, *Les tessères et les monnaies de Palmyre*, Paris 1962, p. 282; PARLASCA, *DamMitt* 3, 1988, pp. 217–219; PLOUG, *Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek*, cat. 89, pp. 216–218.

15. Unknown woman with two keys bearing Greek inscriptions pinned up to the brooch. Palmyra, Palmyra Museum.

PARLASCA, *DamMitt* 3, 1988, p. 217; TANABE, *Sculpture* 1, pl. 359.



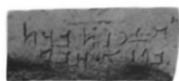


16. Zebida son of Taimamed holding polyptych and a wide tablet. Palmyra, Palmyra Museum, inv. no. 1973/7065.

SADURSKA, BOUNNI, *Sculptures funéraires*, cat. 81, Fig. 9;
TANABE, *Sculpture 1*, Pl. 265.

17. Young Taimaha with his toddler brother Philinos pressing the wide tablet with rhomboidal cut to the chest. Copenhagen, Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, inv. no. 2776.

PLoug, *Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek*, cat. 46, pp. 124–125.

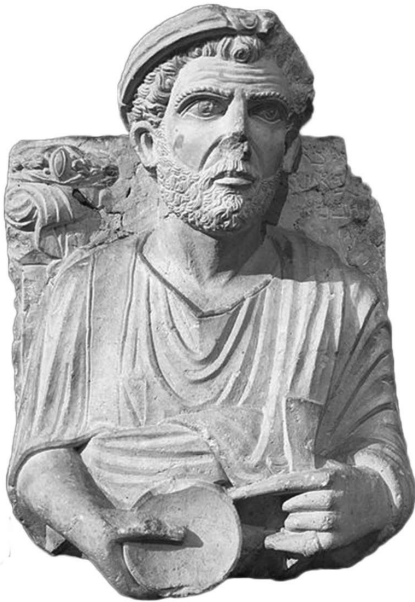


18. Young Yarhai son of Bonne holding a tablet in form of *tabula ansata* with Aramaic inscription. Berlin, Staatliche Museen, inv. no. 27/65.

CIS II, 4479.

19. Gaius Virius Alcimus holding a narrow tablet with his wife Viria Phoibe on the left. London, The British Museum, inv. no. ME 125036.

COLLEDGE, *Art of Palmyra*, p. 67; GAWLIKOWSKI, *Syria* 75, 1998, pp. 145–151.

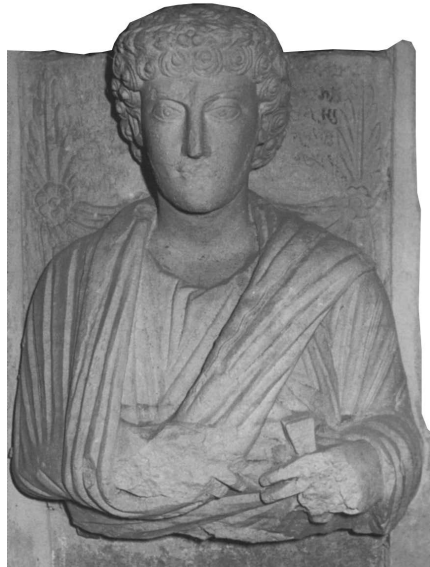


21. Habibion son of Malku holding a *schedula*. Palmyra, Hypogeum of Artaban (no. 5), south-east necropolis, raw 14, loculus 1.

SADURSKA, BOUNNI, *Sculptures funéraires*, cat. 24, Fig. 59.

20. Priest of imperial cult holding ritual vessel and *schedula*. Frankfurt a/Main, Liebighaus.

PARLASCA, *RM* 92, 1985, pp. 347–348, Taf. 146.3.





22. Aliyat with her husband Taimai on the left holding a wide tablet with rhomboidal cut. Paris, Musée du Louvre, inv. no. AO 5077.

CIS II, 4412; INGHOLT, *Studier*, PS 56, p. 94; DENTZER-FEYDY, TEIXIDOR, *Les antiquités de Palmyre*, p. 212.

23. Unknown bearded man with camel behind holding a *schedula* in his left hand. Copenhagen, Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, inv. no. 2833.

PLoug, *Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek*, cat. 47, pp. 126–128.



24. Yarhibol son of Zebd'ata holding a whip and *schedula* with his brother Maquimu on the right. Jerusalem, Bethesda, Biblical Museum, inv. no. PB 2670.

CIS II, 4329, Tab. LIV.

25. Unknown man holding a double *schedula*.
 Palmyra, Palmyra Museum, inv. no. 1773/6597.
 SADURSKA, BOUNNI, *Sculptures funéraires*, cat. 221, Fig. 88;
 TANABE, *Sculpture 1*, Pl. 291.



26. Unknown woman holding a stylus and an open
 poliptych. Palmyra, Palmyra Museum.
 SMITH, *Identity, Community, and State Formation*, p. 213, Fig. 33.