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Rubina Raja

In and Out of Contexts: Explaining Religious Complexity through the Banqueting Tesserae from Palmyra*

Abstract

The so-called banqueting tesserae from Palmyra are the richest source for understanding the religious life of the city in the Roman period. The tesserae, of which more than 1,100 different types, produced in series, exist, functioned as entrance tickets to religious banquets in ancient Palmyra. Their iconography and the inscriptions which many of them carry offer the possibility of beginning to understand the complexities of Palmyrene religious life. They reflect the way in which various religious groups, partly based on the extended families within Palmyrene society, interacted across these large family constellations, and that religious events, such as ritual dining, provided various groups with the possibility of interacting within a variety of social constellations. The tesserae are expressions of the ways in which religious and social life in Palmyra was inseparable, and of the ways in which people and groups acted in specific contexts and could move from one context to another for limited time periods, such as the duration of a banquet. The focus of this article is on a few examples of these tesserae, which tell us about the ways in which Palmyrene society included Roman period iconography in the visual repertoire of the tesserae and the implications that this knowledge about Roman iconography carries for our understanding of Roman period Palmyrene society and religious life.

Keywords: Near East, Palmyra, religious banquets, religious groups, rituals, individual agents, entrance tickets, Palmyrene use of Roman period iconography

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1 Introduction

Ancient Tadmor, better known as Palmyra, was in the Roman period a city which flourished in particular due to the trade relations extending east and west in which the city's elite played an active role.¹ The city grew immensely during the first centuries CE and, until the emperor Aurelian sacked Palmyra in 273 CE as a result of the uprising against the Romans headed by the Palmyrene queen Zenobia, the city prospered greatly (fig. 1). Today the city seems to rise out of the desert sands with its monumental Roman period colonnaded streets and its enormous grave towers that hover around the city's ancient centre. The city is primarily known for its numerous and partly well-preserved ruins dating to the first three centuries CE (fig. 2).² After ISIS took the city in May 2015, the city has gotten further attention, sadly because of the destruction of the ruins and antiquities which has taken place.³ The city, apart from holding unique architecture of the Roman period, is also the place of origin of the largest corpus of funerary portraiture outside of Rome as well as of a large corpus of so-called banqueting *tesserae*.⁴ Within the Palmyra Portrait Project these portraits have been researched for the last four years and the corpus currently comprises more than 2,900 portraits.⁵ The banqueting *tesserae* were extensively catalogued in the 1950s, but much has been learned about them since and they, without doubt, represent the rich-

1 See the following publications for new research on the nature of the trade of Palmyra and trade routes as well as further references: Seland 2015; Seland 2014a and Seland 2014b.

2 For general literature on Palmyra: Starcky and Gawlikowski 1985; Will 1992; Millar 1993; Kaizer 2002; Schmidt-Colinet 2005; Sartre and Sartre-Fauriat 2008. For more recent publications, which include substantial contributions on Palmyra see Andrade 2013; Bastl, Gassner and Muss 2010; Charles-Gaffiot, Lavagne and Hofman 2001; Colburn and Heyn 2008; Dentzer and Orthmann 1989; Eliav, Friedland and Herbert 2008; Gawlikowski 2005; Gawlikowski 2008; Gnoli 2000; Heyn 2010; Ruprechtsberger 1987; Sadurska and Bounni 1994; Schmidt-Colinet 1992; Schmidt-Colinet, Stauffer and al-As'ad 2000; Schmidt-Colinet 2004; Schmidt-Colinet 2005; Schmidt-Colinet and al-As'ad 2013; Smith 2013; Sommer 2005; Tanabe 1986 and Yon 2012.

3 Haugbølle and Raja 2015 for one of several contributions on the recent developments.

4 See Kaizer 2002 for the religious life of Palmyra; see Raja 2015a for the portraits and further literature; Gawlikowski 1973 for the architecture; Henning 2013 on the tower tombs and Smith 2013 for further literature on Palmyra's art, architecture and in particular history.

5 More can be read about the Palmyra Portrait Project in Raja 2015a; Kropp and Raja 2014; Raja and Sørensen 2015a as well as Raja and Sørensen 2015b. Furthermore Kropp and Raja 2016 for a compilation of articles representing the most current research on Palmyra including Palmyrene religion. More can be read about the project on <http://projects.au.dk/palmyraportrait/>.

Fig. 1: Plan of Palmyra after Schnädelbach 2010.

Fig. 2: View of the monumental Arch with the Sanctuary of Bel in the background (Rubina Raja).

est source for understanding aspects of the religious life of Palmyra through their diverse iconography and inscriptions.⁶

Palmyra is unique not only because of its art and architecture, but also because its society displayed a high degree of bilingualism in the public sphere, where Greek was often used along with the local Palmyrene Aramaic dialect. Palmyrenes made clear choices about traditions and adaptations in order to adjust to the fact that the region had come under Roman rule.⁷ However, what furthermore makes Palmyra unique is the fact that the archaeological and epigraphic evidence tells us about ways in which Palmyrene society merged their own traditions with new ideas and imperial trends.⁸ In this article examples of the Palmyrene banqueting tesserae will be considered in order to outline their role in certain religious situations in Palmyrene society, which in particular highlight the Palmyrene awareness of local traditions and imperial trends within their society.⁹ These tiny objects held a large importance in certain situations. They were, so to say, media which had a function that was extremely specific, and the evidence points to the conclusion that they lost their importance after they had served their function as an entrance ticket.

In this article the focus will be on five examples of these tesserae from the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek's collection in Copenhagen, which holds a total of 92 Palmyrene tesserae, to a large extent bought by the Danish archaeologist Harald Ingholt during his fieldwork campaigns in Palmyra in the 1920s and 1930s.¹⁰ These small objects, it is argued here, on the one hand were expressions of facilitation and interaction within and between religious groups in

6 See Ingholt, Seyrig and Starcky 1955 for the, until now, most extensive compilation of the tesserae. This publication holds several tesserae of the same series. Dunant 1959 added further unknown examples. See Seyrig 1940a for an earlier publication on the tesserae and their relation to the ritual banquets in Palmyra. See also Comte du Mesnil du Buisson 1944 and Mesnil du Buisson 1962. These publications appear in two volumes. The illustrations were published in 1944 and the accompanying text volume in 1962. Although the interpretations of Mesnil du Buisson are outdated, the material is important. Furthermore see Dunant 1959 for the tesserae from the Sanctuary of Baalshamin. Also see the recent contributions by Raja 2015b and Raja 2015c. See Al-As'ad et al. 2005 for publication of a unique find of a complete set of banqueting tesserae.

7 See Kaizer 2002, 13–14, 44–48 and 60–65 for bilingual inscriptions from Palmyra. Also see Smith 2013, 16–21 for sources about the bilingualism of Palmyrene society.

8 Raja 2015a for a discussion of the ways in which Palmyrene funerary portraiture reflects local and imperial traditions.

9 Also see Raja 2015a and Raja 2015b for recent discussions of other aspects of the banqueting tesserae.

10 Raja and Sørensen 2015a and Raja and Sørensen 2015b on the work of Harald Ingholt in Palmyra. Furthermore see Hvidberg-Hansen and Ploug 1993 for the collection of the Palmyrene tesserae at Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen.

Palmyrene society and on the other hand were objects which expressed a high awareness of Palmyra being part of the Roman Empire. They are, so to say, objects which have to be interpreted on various levels as media of communication: firstly within a local religious context and secondly within a broader Roman imperial koine, in both cases carrying different meanings according to the situation in which they were viewed and the viewer who saw them.

2 The banqueting tesseræ and their religious context

Religious associations and / or groups in the Roman Near East, their position in local societies and beyond, and the ways in which these groups interacted with other groups within their local setting have been themes in research on religion in the ancient Near East for decades.¹¹ This is also the case for Palmyrene religious life, which has undergone intensive studies, not least within the last two decades, in which the local religious life in Palmyra as well as the religious life of Palmyrenes outside Palmyra has received renewed attention.¹² These studies have underlined particularities of Palmyrene religion and the nature of the religious life based on archaeological, epigraphic and literary sources and are the most comprehensive studies which exist. However, in the case of the local religious life in Palmyra, one body of evidence has not been explored to the fullest extent, namely the Palmyrene tesseræ or religious dining tickets. Through new studies on a comprehensive corpus of Palmyrene funerary sculpture, including the numerous depictions of Palmyrene priests, it is now possible to revisit the tesseræ in the light of new knowledge gained about the structure of Palmyrene priesthoods and to make comparisons with the evidence from the tesseræ.¹³ New research on the visual material, namely the funerary portraits of Palmyrene priests, has given new insight into the structure of priesthood in Palmyra, of which we learn little through the epigraphic and literary evidence. Visual analysis across the various groups of priestly representations, which make up ap-

11 Gabrielsen and Thomsen 2015 for a collection of articles on private associations from the Hellenistic to the Roman period as well as for further references. Also see Gnoli 2016, 31–41 for considerations on the term *Marzeah* as used in Palmyra.

12 See Dirven 1999 as well as Kaizer 2002 for the most substantial contributions on respectively Palmyrene religion outside and in Palmyra.

13 Raja 2016 for a methodological contribution reflecting on the priestly representations from Palmyra, in particular the *loculus* reliefs depicting priests in constellations with other family members. Furthermore see Raja (forthcoming) 2016 for a contribution on the family networks of the Palmyrene priests.

proximately twenty percent of all male funerary representations, indicate that Palmyrene priesthoods were indeed held within families and bestowed upon sons and nephews by more senior male family members.¹⁴

The tesserae testify on the one hand to the vivid and rich religious life of Palmyra and on the other hand to the importance of controlling access to the sanctuaries where religious events were held. However, as much as being a testament to the power of controlling space, they also testify to the exercising of euergetism through spending private or group means on a broader, but selected, group of invitees. While the tesserae as objects testify to a certain practice, which held a highly situational meaning, the iconographic language of these small objects tells us about knowledge of Roman trends in visual language to a degree which has never been fully explored.

The iconographic language of the tesserae is wide-ranging but some groups within this variation can be distinguished. The most common motive is banqueting scenes depicting one or two Palmyrene priests lying on a kline. Palmyrene priest busts are another common motive, along with the representation of deities. Scenes showing libation or incense offerings taking place at altars are also depicted. Symbols, including a wide range of astral ones, are equally prominent within the tesserae iconography. Furthermore, architectural elements are displayed, including, for example, temple fronts. Inscriptions are found on a large number of the tesserae. These may give the name of the person or group offering the banquet, the date of the event or the measures of the food and drink given to each person. A large number of the depictions stem from signet seals, which would have belonged to specific individuals. The iconography of the tesserae in general highlights that specific choices were made almost every time a tesserae series was produced. The tesserae motives show a large variety in iconographic elements, which were combined in numerous ways. Furthermore they show how carefully the motives were imprinted upon the tesserae.

We do not know what the tesserae were in fact called in antiquity. No epigraphic or literary sources from Palmyra mention them. However, since more than 1,100 different types had been registered already by the 1950s, it may be concluded that these tesserae must have played a central role in the structuring of the religious life of Palmyra during the Roman period.¹⁵ The tesserae, which were produced in series, measured from a few centimetres

¹⁴ Raja 2016, 130–131 for the various categories of groups of priestly representations and Raja 2016, 142 for the argument that priesthoods were held within families and extended upon junior members by senior members as well as being expressions of status (positions) rather than actual professions.

¹⁵ Ingholt, Seyrig and Starcky 1955 for the corpus. Also note 6 for further literature.

by another few up to approximately 5 by 5 centimetres. They were mainly made of finely levigated clay. However, there are also some examples in bronze, iron, lead and glass.¹⁶ For each clay tesserae series two moulds with different reliefs were made. In this way a high relief could be produced on each side of the tesserae. A small clay lump would be placed between the two moulds and the thickness of the tesserae would depend on how hard the moulds were manually pressed together. We do not know in what quantities the individual series were made, but the fact that each tessera was made carefully – each one was pressed into the unique moulds, taken out to dry and fired before it could be used – shows that considerable attention was paid in order for the tesserae within each series to look as uniform as possible and perhaps also in order to avoid falsifications being made.¹⁷

Some of the tesserae are datable through their inscriptions, which in some cases give the date of the banquet.¹⁸ The tesserae stem from the period between the late first century CE and the third century CE, when Palmyra was sacked by the emperor Aurelian. Dating of a single tessera on purely stylistic grounds is impossible due to the small size of the objects, which makes it difficult to trace stylistic developments. However, through a pending wider comparative study, it might be possible to discern some datable stylistic elements, which draw, among other things, upon the iconography of coins from the Near East.

Apart from displaying a varied iconographic language, the tesserae also come in a wide variety of shapes. In the collection of the 92 tesserae housed at the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, as many as 18 distinctive tessera shapes can be counted.¹⁹ The shapes of the tesserae may have carried specific meanings, just as the iconographic language did. However, until now it has not been possible to distinguish such meanings, although the shapes do certainly seem to be connected to the tribes or extended families of Palmyra.

The iconography of the tesserae was highly varied and very detailed. In particular, when considering the size of the tesserae, it is striking how much

¹⁶ Hvidberg-Hansen and Ploug 1993, 23 for an introduction to the tesserae in general. They wrongly state that these banquets were held in honour of dead priests. There are no indications that this in fact was the case. Also see Gnoli 2016 for a recapitulation of the evidence speaking against such an interpretation.

¹⁷ The only assumed complete series is published by Al-As'ad et al. 2005. It comprised 125 identical tesserae.

¹⁸ Ingholt, Seyrig and Starcky 1955, 22, no. 158 for a dated example. Furthermore see Hvidberg-Hansen and Ploug 1993, 189, I.N. 3206 for a tessera dated to 460 of the Palmyrene era, which equals 118/119 CE.

¹⁹ Hvidberg-Hansen and Ploug 1993, 170–210 for a presentation of the collection of tesserae at the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen.

attention was paid to iconographic details, such as inscriptions, which many of the tesserae carry. This fact in itself indicates that these were objects which held a meaning that needed to be explicitly expressed and visually communicated and which conveyed important messages in certain situations. However, obviously the importance was lost after the event (the banquet) since the tesserae were largely left behind in the banqueting hall, from where they made their way into the drainage systems.

These tesserae, prevailingly made of clay, were mainly found in and around the banqueting hall in the Sanctuary of Bel in Palmyra (fig. 3).²⁰ The majority were found in the drainage leading from the banqueting hall, indicating that these were not objects that the guests would necessarily take with them after the event. The tesserae functioned as entrance tickets to religious banquets, which were hosted by Palmyrene priests, both as individuals and as groups, which is clear from the inscriptions that often state names of priests or groups of priests and the deity to whom they dedicated the banquet.²¹ It has been argued elsewhere that there is reason to believe that Palmyrene priesthoods were passed on within families from fathers to sons and that a father, most likely with the consent of the priesthood group, could also bestow priesthoods on several sons while still alive.²² So, while being a status symbol which clearly indicated and underlined a certain position in society, Palmyrene priesthoods were also kept within families or extended families, possibly for centuries. In this way, priesthoods were an important part of structuring Palmyrene society within and across the tribes or extended families which made up the basis of Palmyra's social structure, as well as of maintaining order and continuity within Palmyrene religious life.

In order to understand the possible multiple meanings of the tesserae we need to turn our gaze to the sacred spaces in Palmyra and in particular the spaces which were used for gatherings such as banquets. Banqueting rooms, cultic associations and ritual dining are well-known features of religious life in antiquity and throughout wide-spread areas of the ancient world. This also goes for the Near East in the Roman period, where banqueting rooms are found in connection with many of the sanctuaries throughout the region.²³

20 Ingholt, Seyrig and Starcky 1955, III–V. See Gawlikowski 2015 for a new contribution on Bel of Palmyra; also for further bibliography.

21 Cf. Ingholt, Seyrig and Starcky 1955, 91 for a number of these.

22 Raja 2016 and Raja (forthcoming) 2016 for considerations of the structure of Palmyrene priesthoods. The depictions of up to five priests on Palmyrene sarcophagi, in which we often find that several were sons of the reclining father, support this interpretation.

23 Nielsen 2014, for a compilation of numerous of these as well as further references. Also see Gnoli 2016 for a recent contribution on the banqueting evidence from Palmyra. Furthermore Schlumberger 1951, 101–109 and Tarrier 1995, 165–167 for such evidence.

LE SANCTUAIRE

Plan restitué du sanctuaire.

A, autel. B, bassin de lustration. C, salle de banquet. D, édifice à niches. E, plas incliné bordé de gradins.

Fig. 3: Plan of the Sanctuary of Bel in Palmyra after Seyrig, Amy and Will 1968, plan 1.

Fig. 4: View of the Sanctuary of Baalshamin (Rubina Raja).

Palmyra was no exception. In the archaeological record of Palmyra, which is far from complete, we can discern a total of four banqueting halls.²⁴ One was located in the courtyard of the Sanctuary of Bel and a smaller one within the perimeter of the Sanctuary of Baalshamin (fig. 4).²⁵ Two further banqueting halls were placed outside temple complexes. One was located along the main colonnade between the Arch and the Sanctuary of Bel and the other in the form of an annexe to the agora.²⁶

The largest banqueting hall was the one in the courtyard of the Sanctuary of Bel. It is also in this banqueting hall that by far most of the tesserae were found in the drainage system of the complex. The complex measured more than thirty metres, excluding the kitchen annexe to the north. It had

²⁴ Raja 2015a and Raja 2015b for summaries on the available evidence as well as further references. Furthermore see Smith 2013, 113–116 also for an overview of the available archaeological and epigraphic evidence. For an earlier account see Kaizer 2002, 220–229. For the primary publications, Tarrier 1995, 165–166 and Will 1997 remain the basic references for the archaeological evidence.

²⁵ Kaizer 2002, 67 as well as 81–82. See Collart and Vicari 1969 for the primary publication of the sanctuary. Also see Gawlikowski 1990, 2625–2636 for Baalshamin in Palmyra, Raja 2015b, 181 for further bibliography.

²⁶ However, further banqueting rooms are testified in the epigraphic record from Palmyra. See Kaizer 2002, 131–132 for this evidence. These banqueting rooms, however, have not been archaeologically attested.

the capacity to accommodate more than 100 diners.²⁷ It has been argued that priority of place was given to the priests of the various Palmyrene deities, assembled under the presidency of the symposiarch of Bel. However, whether this applied to all occasions and whether other gatherings were organised in the same way and along similar lines is another matter. Judging from the wide variety of tesserae found, we can conclude that the banquets indeed seem to have been hosted by a range of religious groups headed by Palmyrene priests. The banqueting hall in the Sanctuary of Baalshamin, immediately north of the cella of the Temple of Baalshamin, is known through an inscription, which tells us that 18 men, members of a marzeah group, dedicated 'this banqueting hall'.²⁸ The term SMK (*symmako*) is used in this inscription: a term which could mean couch, banquet or banqueting hall.²⁹ In this context, banqueting hall seems most appropriate. Of the two other banqueting rooms not much is left.³⁰

It is very likely that further banqueting halls existed in Palmyra. Nonetheless the low number of banqueting halls found until now and the large number of types of tesserae concentrated within one complex raises the question of how the use of space was structured and managed in order to accommodate numerous groups at different points in time, who did not have their own dining spaces or possibly wished to use the banqueting hall in the Sanctuary of Bel. It is of course speculative to try to establish exactly who assembled where and when and within which time period. However, these are central issues to address because the place of gathering would have carried a meaning for the way in which a group of worshippers was perceived by the surrounding society and how they would have perceived themselves. There must certainly have been implications in choosing between a banqueting room within a sanctuary or outside a temple complex, for example. What we

27 See Seyrig, Amy and Will 1968 and Seyrig, Amy and Will 1975 for the publications on the Sanctuary of Bel; Kaizer 2002, 67–79 for a comprehensive overview of the development of the sanctuary as well as further references. Will 1997, 875–877 concludes that more than 100 diners could be accommodated. Tarrier 1995, 165 estimates that only 50 could have been accommodated. Also see Kaizer 2002, 228 for further references. Judging from the length of the banqueting hall it seems most likely that more than 50 could have been accommodated for a banquet in the main banqueting hall in the Sanctuary of Bel.

28 PAT 0177 for the inscription.

29 Kaizer 2002, 222 for the term and further references.

30 For the banqueting hall along the main colonnade between the Arch and the Sanctuary of Bel see Kaizer 2002, 228 for a summary of the evidence. Furthermore see Bounni and Saliby 1965, 124–126. For the banqueting hall, which was located in an annexe to the agora see Kaizer 2002, 228 as well as Seyrig 1940b.

may establish is that the banqueting hall within the *temenos* of the Sanctuary of Bel seems to have hosted a series of banquets, which were organised by a variety of groups consisting of Palmyrene priests who worshipped a variety of deities. However, who exactly was invited to such events remains unknown to us. It also remains unknown whether only members from the hosting group or members from other groups, or even individuals from outside any group, could be invited.

Hosting a banquet in the main sanctuary of Palmyra must have meant that the given group held a certain status in society in order to be allowed to use the banqueting hall. However, more interestingly, the fact that the banqueting hall was shared by an unknown number of groups indicates that organisation and therefore communication must have taken place across the various groups. There must, for example, have been a centralised booking system. This might not be surprising, but it gives food for thought when thinking about the organisation of the religious life of Palmyra, which to a large extent has been claimed to adhere to a division based on the tribes of Palmyra.³¹ It might be assumed that the main priests of the Temple of Bel were in charge of organising and keeping track of the activities taking place in the sanctuary's banqueting hall. However, the mere fact that a variety of groups were active there over centuries indicates that communication and interaction between these groups were the rule rather than the exception. Here the *tesserae* must have played an active role, since the few examples of complete series which have been found indicate by their number that guests beyond the priestly group themselves might have been invited for these gatherings, which were accessible by invitation only. One example of what is interpreted as a complete series of *tesserae* includes a complete pot, which was found dug down within the perimeter of the Sanctuary of Arsu.³² This contained a total of 125 specimen of the same *tessera* series. These are interpreted as constituting a complete set of *tesserae*, which had not subsequently been divided or which had been collected when the guests entered the sanctuary for the banquet. This series gives an indication of the size of this specific event, which is not small. Such a large size for these banquets is indeed indicated by the size of the banqueting hall in the Sanctuary of Bel as well.

³¹ Kaizer 2002, 67 as well as 71 also for further references.

³² Al-As'ad et al. 2005 for the most comprehensive publication of these as well as Will 1983 for a preliminary publication of the Sanctuary of Arsu. Al-As'ad and Teixidor 1985 for the information on the sanctuary through epigraphic evidence. The existence of this temple was already known through epigraphic evidence: PAT 0197 (dated to 132 CE) and through the publication by Drijvers 1995, 34–38 (dating to 144 CE).

Fig. 5: Funerary banqueting relief in the collection of Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, I. N. 1159 and 1160. On the left hand pinky of the reclining priest a signet seal ring is visible (Palmyra Portrait Project).

The tesserae which carry inscriptions often give names of the men depicted on the tesserae. However, some also let us know that these were invitations offered by individual priests and groups of priests, belonging to a range of cultic groups, whereof many mention the god Bel, the main deity of Palmyra.³³ Many of the tesserae were highly personalised and carried the imprint of signet seals from rings. These would have connected the tesserae closely to one specific individual. Often these rings were represented in the male funerary sculpture, where priests as well as ordinary male individuals carry them on their fingers (fig. 5). These representations indicate that the signet seals belonged to individuals.

The motives on the tesserae often drew on local imagery, such as depictions of Palmyrene priests with their characteristic round hats with flat tops.³⁴ Furthermore, symbols and local deities could be represented on the tesserae.³⁵ However, along with the local motives, a string of motives which

³³ See for example the inscriptions on the following tesserae in Hvidberg-Hansen and Ploug 1993, 171, I. N. 2769; 172, I. N. 3190; 173, I. N. 1141; 176, I. N. 3192 or 177, I. N. 3195. These groups have not been studied in depth through the inscriptions on the tesserae until now.

³⁴ Raja 2016 for the Palmyrene priests and their clothing as well as for further references. Also Stucky 1973 for an earlier contribution on the priests, which remains a standard work.

³⁵ Ingholt, Seyrig and Starcky 1955 for the corpus of the tesserae as well as Hvidberg-Hansen and Ploug 1993, 170–210.

clearly belong to a much more Roman cultural koine appear. These are expressions of a knowledge of trends and fashions in the Roman Empire in general, as well as a genuine interest within Palmyrene society to incorporate such motives into the iconography used to express belonging. These Roman motives can be said to lend a Roman imperial flair to an extremely local Palmyrene event: the closed religious banquet restricted to a certain number of individuals. Therefore these motives may also be seen as situating the religious life of Palmyra within the broader Roman religious koine, displaying mythological themes, Roman style portraits and Roman style deities. Further, whereas the tesserae in themselves were objects whose context was crucial in order to understand them and for their meaning in general, their motives were also in themselves part of situating Palmyrene religious life as part of the religious life of the Roman Empire.

Let us return to the examples to be treated here. They all come from the collection at the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek in Copenhagen. The following five examples were chosen in order to highlight some of the particularities of the tesserae's iconography, on the one hand giving insight into the knowledge about Roman period iconography in Palmyra, and on the other hand telling us about the highly context-related choices that were made by the individuals or groups who hosted banquets.

The first example is a rectangular tessera made of clay measuring 2.6 cm (l) by 2.0 cm (w) (figs. 6 and 7).³⁶ The tessera is 0.6 cm thick. One of the lower corners has been damaged. On one side a Palmyrene priest is depicted in a reclining position on a kline. He is resting his left arm on the kline, his right arm is lying along the side of his body, and his right hand is resting on his right knee. He is wearing a himation and the typical Palmyrene priestly hat. In his left hand he is holding a drinking cup. Above him a vegetal grape leaf motive is seen. Between the grape leaves are astral symbols (a star and planets). Below the kline an inscription is visible. It reads RPBWL YRH(Y), in translation Refabôl Yarha(i), a Palmyrene name. On the other side is an oval signet seal imprint. The seal depicts a Roman-style portrait bust seen in profile turning towards the right. The male person depicted has a strong chin and straight nose and short cropped hair. The top part of his garment is also visible. The bust portrait is clearly made in a Roman imperial style and not the local Palmyrene style, which is found in the Palmyrene funerary portraits. Another two examples of this series are known.

36 For this tessera see Ingholt, Seyrig and Starcky 1955, no. 779; Mesnil de Buisson 1944, no. 501; Milik 1972, 279, as well as Hvidberg-Hansen and Ploug 1993, no. 186.

Fig. 6: Tessera 186 (Hvidberg-Hansen and Ploug 1993), obverse showing a reclining Palmyrene priest (Rubina Raja).

Fig. 7: Tessera 186 (Hvidberg-Hansen and Ploug 1993), reverse depicting a Roman style portrait bust in profile (Rubina Raja).

Fig. 8: Tessera 170 (Hvidberg-Hansen and Ploug 1993), reverse depicting the head of a bull (Rubina Raja).

Fig. 9: Tessera 170 (Hvidberg-Hansen and Ploug 1993), obverse depicting the abduction of Europa by the bull (Rubina Raja).

The second example is a round tessera made of clay measuring 1.9 cm in diameter and 0.2 cm thick (figs. 8 and 9).³⁷ The tessera is well preserved. On one side a frontal bull's head is depicted. Below the head is a half-moon. Each end of the half-moon ends in a circle. Between and on each side of the horns there are circles as well. On the other side, a bull turning towards the

³⁷ See Hvidberg-Hansen and Ploug 1993, no. 170. The tessera is the same type as considered by Ingholt, Seyrig and Starcky 1955, no. 607 and Mesnil de Buisson 1944, nos. 46, 70, 82, 399, 431, 512. It is, however, not mentioned in Ingholt, Seyrig and Starcky 1955 as being in the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek in Copenhagen.

Fig. 10: Tessera 214 (Hvidberg-Hansen and Ploug 1993), obverse depicting a bust of Tyche (Rubina Raja).

Fig. 11: Tessera 214 (Hvidberg-Hansen and Ploug 1993), reverse, blank side (Rubina Raja).

right is depicted. On the bull a woman with raised arms is sitting. This scene depicts Europa being abducted. There are several examples of this series.³⁸

The third example is also a round tessera made of clay. It measures 1.7 cm in diameter and is 0.5 cm thick (figs. 10 and 11).³⁹ On one side the tessera does not have an image. On the other side it has a bust in profile turning to

³⁸ Mesnil de Buisson 1944, nos. 46, 70, 82, 399, 431, 512 as well as Ingholt, Seyrig and Starcky 1955, type no. 607, for identical examples.

³⁹ Ingholt, Seyrig and Starcky 1955, no. 1041 for the type. Hvidberg-Hansen and Ploug 1993, no. 214 for the publication of the tesserae.

the right. The bust depicts a female figure with a straight pointed nose and a marked chin as well as a strong neck. Her hair is gathered in a bun on her head and a veil is draped, falling from the lower part of the back of her head over her shoulder. On her head she is wearing a mural crown, which identifies her as the city goddess Tyche. Part of an inscription is visible below the bust. It reads HB(?) in translation Habb(ê)(?), and is followed by a symbol, perhaps a star. No other examples of this tessera are known.

The fourth is a square tessera made of clay. All four sides measure 2.1 cm and it is 0.6 cm thick (figs. 12 and 13).⁴⁰ On one side of the tessera a frontal bust of a priest is depicted. This male person wears a tunic and a chlamys. The chlamys is fastened with a broach on his right shoulder. On his head he wears the typical Palmyrene priestly hat, which is circular with a flat top. On each side of his head a star is depicted. Both stars are framed by palm branches. Below the bust an inscription is visible. The transcription reads SLM MLKW, i. e., Salmâ, Malkû in translation. On the other side an imprint of a signet seal is visible. It depicts a female bust seen in profile turning to the right. The female wears a helmet with foliage. The bust is surrounded by a wreath which on the bottom is tied together and the ends of the binding are visible below the wreath. In each corner a star is depicted. The female represents Athena. Several examples of this series are known.⁴¹

The fifth example is a triangular tesserae made of clay. It measures 1.6 cm on the two longest sides and 1.5 cm on the bottom. It is 0.4 cm thick (figs. 14 and 15).⁴² On one side a palm branch is placed centrally. It is flanked by two rosettes.⁴³ On the other side a signet seal imprint is visible. It depicts a full figure sitting on a chair turning towards the right. The figure is wearing a long garment and is holding a lyre in the left hand. The right hand is placed behind the body. On the head the figure wears a kalathos. The attributes suggest that this is a depiction of Apollon, who in Palmyra was compared to Nabû.

These five examples are significant to draw attention to, not because they are special within the corpus of tesserae from Palmyra, but exactly because they are not special. They all include Palmyrene iconography, as well as

40 Ingholt, Seyrig and Starcky 1955, no. 821; Mesnil du Buisson 1944, nos. 28, 128, 515, 519–520 and 523; Milik 1972, 255; Hvidberg-Hansen and Ploug 1993, no. 189.

41 Ingholt, Seyrig and Starcky 1955, no. 821; Mesnil du Buisson 1944, nos. 28, 128, 515, 519–520 and 523.

42 Ingholt, Seyrig and Starcky 1955, no. 971; Mesnil du Buisson 1944, nos. 51 and 287 as well as Milik 1972, 61. Furthermore Hvidberg-Hansen and Ploug 1993, no. 207.

43 Hvidberg-Hansen and Ploug 1993, no. 207 wrongly describe these rosettes, which consist of seven dots, as depicting the planets.

Fig. 12: Tessera 189 (Hvidberg-Hansen and Ploug 1993), obverse depicting a bust of a Palmyrene priest (Rubina Raja).

Fig. 13: Tessera 189 (Hvidberg-Hansen and Ploug 1993), reverse showing signet seal imprint with a bust in profile of the goddess Athena (Rubina Raja).

iconographical elements which clearly draw on visual language from the Roman world.

While such a mixture of styles is not encountered often in the funerary sphere, from where the most extensive comparative visual evidence from Palmyra comes, the Palmyrene banqueting *tesserae* display this unique mix of visual languages more often than was earlier thought.⁴⁴ The *tesserae*, which functioned as entrance tickets to religious banquets, would have been seen by at least the number of individuals who gained access and the motives on them might have been topics for conversation during the banquets, just as we know from Roman sources that paintings and sculpture displayed in banqueting halls in private elite homes and imperial houses and palaces were. This would have given the *tesserae* a very particular function in their situational contexts, namely to display Palmyrene knowledge of the world within and beyond Palmyra.

Portrait busts and full figure representations were common on the *tesserae*, in particular images of Palmyrene priests; however, as the first *tesserae* described above shows, a Roman-style portrait bust or portrait could also be shown. So could Roman-style iconography of gods and deities. Knowledge of Roman period glyptic and visual language must have been present and not only on a sporadic level, but on a level which can be said to be highly aware of trends within the imperial Roman sphere.

The first *tessera* described above depicting a Palmyrene priest on one side and a portrait bust in Roman-style on the other side may be interpreted as depicting one and the same individual in two different contexts: on the one hand as a Palmyrene priest and on the other hand as a Roman citizen. While not being common, such 'double' depiction of one and the same individual on one object is attested in Palmyra. A famous sarcophagus depicts, on its lid, a Palmyrene male lying on a kline in Palmyrene banqueting attire and on the front of the sarcophagus box the same individual is displayed in Roman-style garments making an offering at an altar.⁴⁵ This is a clear indication of the wish to display such multiple identities: on the one hand as being firmly situated within Palmyrene society as part of the local elite and on the other hand as being part of the wider Roman world and knowing how to display such affiliations and connections, in this case by offering sacrifice in Roman clothes.

The local Palmyrene iconography showed a wide variety of images and inscriptions. In particular the funerary sphere offers evidence for this.⁴⁶ In

⁴⁴ Raja 2015a for considerations on the display in the funerary sphere.

⁴⁵ Schmidt-Colinet 2007 as well as Schmidt-Colinet 2009 for publications of this sarcophagus.

⁴⁶ Raja 2015a as well as Raja 2016 for considerations of such aspects.

Fig. 14: Tessera 207 (Hvidberg-Hansen and Ploug 1993), obverse depicting a palm branch flanked by rosettes (Rubina Raja).

Fig. 15: Tessera 207 (Hvidberg-Hansen and Ploug 1993), reverse showing signet seal imprint with a full figure representation of Apollon (Rubina Raja).

this sphere, which was a more ‘closed’ or restricted sphere where Palmyrene families displayed their status and connections, in particular within a family perspective, the evidence shows that displaying connections to the wider Roman world was of minimal importance. Palmyrene visual language as well as Palmyrene Aramaic were used almost exclusively in this sphere. Emphasis was on displaying the close and extended family ties within a purely Palmyrene context. This was obviously not the case with the contexts in which the banqueting tesserae were used. Although it is clear that the tesserae were made for particular occasions and only seem to have been used one time,

these occasions obviously offered the possibility for displaying a range of identities and knowledge about how to construct these in a highly bilingual society, which we know that Palmyra was. A wider variety of choices in the spheres in which the tesserae were used were obviously available and accepted. This is also reflected in the depictions of deities. On the tesserae presented here Tyche, Apollon, Athena, as well as an image depicting Europa on the Bull are included. All these images are shown in a clearly Greco-Roman iconographic style ranging from busts in profile, over full figure representations to full scene representation. The tesserae are not the only media in which the adaptation of Roman visual language is observed in Palmyra. The famous imported marble statue of Athena, a Roman copy of a classical Athena statue is another example of such a display of stylistic knowledge (fig. 16).⁴⁷ This statue clearly also underlines, just as do the tesserae and the sarcophagus described above, that in the religious sphere it was obviously accepted, and could even be underlining status, that one displayed knowledge of Roman period motives and styles, be they portrait styles, statue images or mythological motives.

These banqueting tesserae provide us with information about religious rituals, banquets, the iconography of deities, dates of events and names of people and gods who were celebrated. No single tessera gives all this information. The selective choices concerning the information given on these tesserae complicate their interpretation, but also give a clear indication that these were objects which, apart from fitting into one material group that we might expect was well-known within Palmyrene society, also gave the possibility of communicating a wide, but selective, range of information and ideas to a broader community. This included dispersing knowledge about the Roman period styles and trends from outside Palmyra. One of the media through which this knowledge was communicated and spread were the signet seals on rings belonging to individuals. These, as underlined above, are a common feature depicted in the funerary sculpture as having been worn by men. Through the images on these seals, which we might imagine were also used for imprints on a string of other media than the banqueting tesserae, knowledge about the changing broader Roman styles were communicated to an extent which otherwise is not visible in Palmyrene art and architecture.

⁴⁷ Gawlikowski 1996 for this sculpture and considerations of its meaning. Stewart 2016, 606–610 for new insights on this statue.

Fig. 16: Marble statue of the goddess Athena in Palmyra Museum (Rubina Raja).

3 The tesserae and the structure of the religious life of Palmyra

The banqueting tesserae from Palmyra constitute a fascinating bulk of material evidence, which tells us about the structure of the religious life in Palmyra, the changing fashions in the visual language and not least about the situational meaning that these objects held. The tesserae tell us about ways of controlling religious spaces at certain moments in time, appropriating

them for the use of a specific group, who would possibly have invited individuals from beyond the core of the group for these events. They urge us to think harder about the fluid borders between public and private spaces and they underline the importance of religious groups within Palmyrene society: groups which are only visible through this evidence and not in the so-called public inscriptions from the city. These religious groups seem to have been able to use the city's prominent sacred spaces, including the Sanctuary of Bel, at various points in time; thereby cult spaces were in certain situations being appropriated also for the celebration of deities other than the main deity of the sanctuary. The individuals or groups who hosted banquets all seem to have belonged to a group of people who were tied together through religious affiliation and the impression is that these groups behaved in a manner that we would otherwise attribute to a public institution. They used public space to celebrate rituals and banquets, possibly legitimising themselves by letting chosen guests take part in their celebrations, and thereby gaining acknowledgement on a broader societal scale. The tesserae give us a glimpse into this unknown world of Palmyrene societal conventions connected to the religious life.

The tesserae give access to a variety of 'contexts'. Firstly the religious context of the event which was celebrated is usually somehow communicated on the tesserae through the depiction of a deity or religious symbols. Secondly the context of the priest or the priestly group who celebrated at a given event is usually given also through the depictions and sometimes inscriptions on the tesserae. Thirdly the context of the event itself is sometimes given through inscriptions mentioning the date, the venue or the measures of the food and drink distributed. The tesserae, so to say, were media through which much information could be passed from sender (the host/hosts) to receiver (the invitee). Therefore these items also functioned as agents in the communication between the inviting individual/group and the invited individuals or invitees.

Through the iconography and inscriptions on the tesserae we are told about the following parameters:

1. Deities and rituals;
2. Hierarchies (between the group and the individual);
3. Spectators/guests/invitees;
4. (Fixed) meeting place (indicated through the dates of the events which sometimes are indicated on the tesserae).

These parameters indicate that the tesserae were issued by organised groups or individuals who were attached to organised groups. Nonetheless they also tell us, through their wide-ranging visual vocabulary, that there

was a broad-ranging span within which the inviting individual or group could formulate and mould the message which he or they wanted to convey. The parameters outlined above certainly point to the conclusion that the invitations for these banquets were issued by individuals belonging to a group or groups, which might be compared to association-like constellations. Rituals and ritual acts figure prominently in the iconography of the tesserae, both in the banqueting scenes where reclining priests are shown as well as in the motives including active offerings taking place at altars (figs. 17 and 18). Hierarchies are displayed through the mentioning of the group or an individual priest, sometimes also stating to which group the priest belonged. The priests and groups of priests were important agents in the process of negotiating access to the events, which the tesserae functioned as tickets to. The priests, who were not professional priests, but rather individuals who came from families where the men held priesthoods, must also have held other public positions.⁴⁸ In this way their engagement was entangled and intertwined with the public and private religious spheres as well as the civic sphere. The banquets might have been one event where people from across groups within Palmyra could have come together in constellations other than normally expected. The fact that these tesserae were invitations, which several inscriptions on them explicitly tell us, also allows us to conclude that guests from outside the hosting group were possibly invited. Last but not least, information about the actual meeting place or location of the banquet is not present on the tesserae. However, the dates which are inscribed on some of them indicate that a particular meeting place must have been communicated and since many are found in the drains from the banqueting hall in the Sanctuary of Bel, it can be concluded that a fixed, even if temporary, meeting place must have been communicated through other means or have been absolutely obvious to the invited guests.

In Palmyra, civic institutions, known through the epigraphic evidence from the city, together with the various religious groups, including a large number of Palmyrene priests most prominently featured in the inscriptions of the tesserae, were active agents in the way in which the interplay and renegotiation of collective and individual values were communicated. Along this line the tesserae from Palmyra can be seen as instruments through which a fixed space – albeit temporary in a physical sense due to the nature of banquets – was created for a variety of groups that were not fixed. Such a situation was made possible through exercising control – inclusion and exclusion – over certain spaces at certain times. The sanctuaries were ap-

⁴⁸ For the status of priests see Raja 2016.

Fig. 17: Tessera 185 (Hvidberg-Hansen and Ploug 1993), obverse depicting reclining Palmyrene priest (Rubina Raja).

Fig. 18: Tessera 178 (Hvidberg-Hansen and Ploug 1993), depicting two persons mixing wine in a crater. In the background incense altars are visible (Rubina Raja).

propriated and controlled by groups at certain points in time through giving access only by holding tesserae. Such a function of the individual or group would firmly place these groups in the grey zone between the public and the private sphere and underlines the function of the tesserae as media allowing for various states of ‘in and out of context(s)’ in a highly situational sense.

The groups mentioned on the tesserae can be termed religious groups. They were in a sense what we might understand as private, but in fact behaved as public or semi-public institutions if we compare them to Roman period models. However, it does not seem as if these groups were competing with the civic society or religious structure of the city. We have no evidence that speaks to us about conflict with authorities. One obvious reason could be that the members of these groups were deeply embedded in the political, civic and religious life of the city anyhow. One indication of this is the fact that approximately twenty percent of all male funerary representations are representations of priests, which implies that Palmyrene priesthood was a status indication rather than a full time profession.⁴⁹ These religious groups rather seem to have complemented the city's civic life through participating actively in the religious life of the city by using the public sanctuaries as meeting places and as venues for larger banquets including more than their own members. By adopting public structural patterns, these associations would have legitimised themselves easily within the civic sphere. In this way they became powerful instruments in the construction and development of the city's religious life and in particular in the appropriation of cultic spaces: claiming a certain sacred space for a certain amount of time in honour of a particular god and thereby turning it into a different sacred space then it usually was. This phenomenon should be viewed as a temporary appropriation in a more abstract, but not less crucial, way. In many ways this sort of temporary relocation and manifestation, which moves the celebration of the groups from a non-spatial and non-visual context to a spatially and visually defined context is a very profound transformation and visualisation of the religious event. If we can begin to grasp such shifts through the developing cultural stabilisations which the tesserae communicate through their visual language, then we may begin to understand the nature of some of these mechanisms.

4 Conclusion

The Palmyrene banqueting tesserae remain an under-explored resource for understanding the complex religious life of the city in the Roman period. Palmyrene religious life seems to have operated within both extended local family structures as indicated by the funerary evidence, and the structures

⁴⁹ Raja 2016 for the statistical information on the funerary portraits of the Palmyrene priests.

of adapted versions of association inspired by the Greco-Roman world as the tesserae indicate, as well as to have adapted to the overall civic structure of the Roman world. The religious groups, which seem to have had functions that could be described as moving between the public and private spheres, or perhaps rather as moving on the border between the private and public spheres as well as negotiating between them, seem to have been a central element in the way in which sacred spaces were used in a certain kind of context. What becomes clearer, in a detailed study of the evidence which the tesserae offer, may for large parts rather be a process of integration and assimilation of local societal structures into the clear cut civic structure influenced by the fact that Palmyra had come under Roman rule, and that a changing iconography was part of such a process.

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Religion in the Roman Empire

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Religion in the Roman Empire (RRE) is bold in the sense that it intends to further and document new and integrative perspectives on religion in the Ancient World combining multidisciplinary methodologies. Starting from the notion of 'lived religion' it will offer a space to take up recent, but still incipient research to modify and cross the disciplinary boundaries of 'History of Religion', 'Anthropology', 'Classics', 'Ancient History', 'Ancient Judaism', 'Early Christianity', 'New Testament', 'Patristic Studies', 'Coptic Studies', 'Gnostic and Manichaean Studies', 'Archaeology' and 'Oriental Languages'. It is the purpose of the journal to stimulate the development of an approach which can comprise the local and global trajectories of the multi-dimensional pluralistic religions of antiquity.

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