Religion in the Roman Empire

Volume 2
No. 1
2016

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Mohr Siebeck

Religion in the Roman Empire

Edited by Reinhard Feldmeier, Karen L. King, Rubina Raja, Annette Yoshiko Reed, Christoph Riedweg, Jörg Rüpke, Seth Schwartz, Christopher Smith, Markus Vinzent

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Publisher: Mohr Siebeck GmbH & Co. KG, Postfach 2040, 72010 Tübingen
Can be purchased at bookstores.

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Typeset by Martin Fischer, Tübingen.

Printed by Gulde-Druck, Tübingen.

Printed in Germany.

ISSN 2199-4463 (Print Edition)

ISSN 2199-4471 (Online Edition)

Rubina Raja

Representations of Priests in Palmyra: Methodological Considerations on the Meaning of the Representation of Priesthood in the Funerary Sculpture from Roman Period Palmyra*

Abstract

The city of Palmyra, ancient Tadmor, holds an immense amount of archaeological and written evidence informing us about the life and practices of people in the city. Apart from being home to unique architecture and monuments from the Roman period, Palmyra is home to the largest corpus of funerary sculpture portraying individuals outside of Rome. This makes these portraits, which have been collected within the framework of the Palmyra Portrait Project, a unique resource through which methodological considerations may be carried out. In this contribution, aspects of the representations of the Palmyrene priests, which make up approximately eighteen percent of all male representations in the funerary sculpture, take centre stage. These depictions of priests, in total 289, are shown in a variety of figural constellations divided between various forms (loculus reliefs and sarcophagi lids and boxes). Palmyrene priests are the only group of individuals in the funerary sculpture which are shown in the capacity of holding an office. It is here argued on the basis of the vast material that being depicted as a priest is to be seen much more as an expression of status than of profession. Furthermore, the nature and importance of the depiction of priests in various family constellations is discussed on the basis of the corpus, providing the first ever possibility to view these within a broader methodological framework, which has implications for ways of interpreting representations of individuals in funerary sculpture in general.

Keywords: Palmyra, priestly representations, funerary sphere, family constellations, positions and professions

* I would like to acknowledge the ERC Advanced Grant project Lived Ancient Religion (LAR) and the members of the LAR group, who all contributed to discussions of part of the material presented here. Furthermore I would like to thank the Carlsberg Foundation for generously financing the Palmyra Portrait Project. Last but not least research assistant Signe Krag is warmly acknowledged for her work on drawing up the first catalogue of the priestly representations from the Palmyra Portrait Project database.

In the Roman period Palmyra in the Syrian Desert was a hub for trade and exchange between East and West, North and South. The prosperous economy of the city in the first three centuries CE also left its imprint on the art and architecture of the city. It is from these few hundred years that most of the archaeological evidence testifying to the city's life stems. Not only was Palmyrene society fully aware of the trends and fashions of the Roman and Parthian Empires – which it to a large extent also incorporated into its own culture¹ – but Palmyrene society also had a distinct local culture, which continued throughout the centuries in question. With the Palmyrene evidence we have the opportunity to research and discuss developments and their meanings within their contemporary settings particularly of certain groups of evidence, which present unique situations due to their quantity and state of preservation.

Palmyrene funerary portraiture is the largest group of Roman period portraiture found outside Rome.² This makes this group of portrait sculpture extremely significant when studying the spread, adaptation and use of portraiture as well as the meaning of this phenomenon outside of Rome. Until recently the vast corpus of funerary portraiture from Palmyra remained heavily underexplored, not least because the sheer amount of the material hindered any single scholar from compiling a corpus and thus made statistical analysis across different groups within portraiture and over different time periods impossible.³ Since 2012, the Palmyra Portrait Project has worked on compiling a corpus of the Palmyrene funerary portraiture; the corpus at present holds approximately 2,900 portraits, which are compiled in a detailed database that allows for comparison of all the portraits

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

2 For an introduction to the project, its aims and research questions see Kropp and Raja 2014.

3 K. Parlasca has undertaken important research on the Palmyrene funerary portraits and his research remains of utmost importance. However, it is also clear that the lack of the possibility to undertake statistical analysis has led to some conclusions which no longer hold up. See among other publications Parlasca 1985 and 1995, for contributions which deal with aspects of Palmyrene funerary portraiture. More can be read about the Palmyra Portrait Project on the following webpage: <http://projects.au.dk/palmyraportrait/>.

and the various subgroups.⁴ This has opened up fundamentally new ways of researching the portraiture and its meaning as expressions of aspects of Palmyrene society.⁵ The sheer amount of the portraiture, of which three percent is dated by inscriptions, gives unique possibilities to discuss issues of style and chronology.⁶ Furthermore, the combination of the number of portraits and the tight chronology allows for methodological considerations in particular concerning the meaning of Palmyrene portraiture, but in turn also for portraiture from the Roman period in general. The Palmyrene funerary portraiture is indeed the most significant group of portrait sculpture from outside of Rome. In this contribution, representations of Palmyrene priests, which make up a substantial group within the funerary portraiture, are considered.⁷ Priests are shown in family constellations in loculus reliefs much more seldomly than other individuals. Furthermore, priests are the only group of individuals shown in a capacity of having an office, which here is argued not to be a profession as such. There are several reasons for priests being depicted as priests and for them not being depicted with members of their families in the loculus reliefs. These reasons will be discussed below.

Palmyrene funerary portraiture was depicted in a variety of forms, all made from local limestone. Most common were the so-called loculus reliefs, square slabs that covered the burial niches in often very large hypogea and tower tombs, which in some instances held more than 300 burials.⁸ The loculus reliefs would show busts of the deceased and sometimes family members and were often accompanied by one or more inscriptions, most often in Palmyrene Aramaic.⁹ Within this group a distinct sub-group can be identified, namely that of the loculus banqueting reliefs. These would most often show a reclining man on a kline accompanied by family members, most often the wife. Another large group are the sarcophagi lids and their boxes. On the lids family scenes were depicted, always with the *pater familias* reclining on a kline, with several family members often standing behind him

⁴ Kropp and Raja 2014.

⁵ Kropp and Raja 2015.

⁶ Kropp and Raja 2014, as well as Kropp and Raja 2015.

⁷ See Raja 2015a for a contribution considering the religious dining tickets and the depictions of priests on these.

⁸ See Henning 2013 for the most recent and comprehensive publication on the grave towers of Palmyra.

⁹ See Hillers and Cussini 1996 for the most comprehensive collection of the funerary inscriptions. However, this corpus can now be extended through all the inscriptions collected within the Palmyra Portrait Project, which has been translated by Jean-Baptiste Yon.

or sitting at the end of the kline. The sarcophagi boxes were used to display further family members and were also often accompanied by inscriptions. Much smaller groups stemming from the funerary sphere are sculpture in the round, wall paintings from tombs as well as ceiling decoration also from tombs, which could also carry depictions of priests. Furthermore, there are representations stemming from the public sphere; however, these are scarce due to the fact that much material has been lost over the centuries.¹⁰

1 Palmyrene priests

Although representations of Palmyrene priests make up the largest group of priestly representations dating to the Roman period from outside of Rome, Palmyrene priests have mainly been discussed using the epigraphic and literary evidence. These discussions have not taken analysis very far, since the evidence does not allow for far reaching conclusions.¹¹ The written evidence does not give insight into the formation, structure or development of priesthood in Palmyra in the Roman period. The evidence and terminology connected with Palmyrene priesthoods are discussed and summarised by Kaizer in his book *The Religious Life of Palmyra* from 2002, which still remains the standard work on Palmyrene religion in the Roman period.¹² The terms *kmr'* and *'pkl'* are both attested as priestly titles in Palmyra, the latter most likely stemming from Akkadian.¹³ Kaizer gives a comprehensive overview of the evidence and comes to the conclusion that the evidence indicates that priesthoods may have been hereditary in Palmyra, that titles were most likely not monopolised by certain cults and that we cannot say anything about whether or how Roman presence had an influence on the development of priesthood in Palmyra in the first three centuries CE.¹⁴ In conclusion, there is not much which can be said about Palmyrene priesthoods in Roman period Palmyra from the epigraphic and literary evidence.

Despite the vast corpus of representations of priests, no one has as yet collected these representations in order to discuss them in an analytical man-

10 In the Palmyra Portrait Project database there are currently in total 23 depictions of priests from non-funerary contexts.

11 Kaizer 2002 provides an overview of discussions until 2002 and thereafter only Smith 2013 provides a brief summary of the same discussions but does not take the evidence further.

12 Kaizer 2002, see in particular chapter 4, 213–259 on groups of worshippers, priests and beneficiaries and 237–238 dealing with terms connoting priestly titles in particular.

13 Kaizer 2002, 237 n. 124.

14 Kaizer 2002, 240–242.

ner, trying to assess whether the representations may give more insight into Palmyrene priesthoods.¹⁵ This contribution constitutes the first attempt at discussing these representations as a group, and the implications for what it meant to be a priest in Palmyra. Until now these representations have been underestimated in scholarship and even ignored as being ‘relatively prosaic’ and disappointing because of their ‘standard iconography’ in which they either are ‘reclining on a couch or performing a sacrificial act’.¹⁶ However, it is now possible to show that despite standardisation in iconographical motives, the representations of the priests varied to an extent which until now has not been realised.

Palmyrene priests, in the funerary as well as non-funerary portraiture, are characterised by the significant Palmyrene priestly hat, the so-called *modus*, as well as their beardless faces and clean-shaven heads.¹⁷ The *modus* is a round hat with a flat top, which shows signs of Hellenistic influences.¹⁸ It stands in contrast to other priestly hats in the Near East, which are usually conical. Whereas the pictorial evidence – in the funerary portraiture, the public representations and the banqueting tesserae – presents us with a plethora of evidence for Palmyrene priests, the literary sources are immensely scarce when it comes to mention of priests and priesthoods.¹⁹ However, there are public monuments which depict priests and label them as such and therefore clearly indicate that men shown wearing the *modus*, with clean shaven heads and beardless faces are priests. Among these monuments is a relief from the temple of Nebu showing three generations of priests.²⁰ However, not a single inscription accompanying a funerary portrait depicting a priest tells us that the person depicted was, indeed, a priest.²¹ In the case of the funerary portraits we rely solely on the representations themselves: the presence of the priestly *modus* and the signifiers of the ‘trade’ such

15 Heyn 2008 is an attempt at in general discussing some issues of priestly representations in Palmyra.

16 Kaizer 2002, 235.

17 Kaizer 2002, 235–236 for a summary on the scholarship mentioning the Palmyrene *modus*.

18 Drijvers 1976, 22. Stucky 1973, 176 as well as Balty 1996, 439 on the clothing of the priests. Balty underlines that the cloak or mantle fixed with a fibula on the right shoulder as well as the broad belt worn high on the waist over the tunic form part of the priestly attire. This can now also be confirmed through the overview of the priests. The Hellenistic stelae depicting priests from Umm al-Ahmed also show these with a round hat with a flat top.

19 Kaizer 2002, 235–242.

20 Tanabe 1986, pl. 173.

21 This observation is based on the survey of the portraits in the Palmyra Portrait Project database.

as the pitcher and the incense bowl with which almost all priests are depicted.²² Furthermore, we rely on representations on the banqueting tesseræ which sometimes mention the persons depicted as priests; from them we may extrapolate with regard to similar depictions found in the funerary sculpture and conclude that men with *modus*, as well as pitchers and incense bowls, must be priests although they are not labelled as such.²³ Therefore, there is no doubt that the depictions in the funerary portraiture also show priests. However, what remains to be discussed is what these representations meant within the context of Palmyrene society and in particular within funerary contexts.

2 Priestly depictions in Palmyrene funerary portraiture

In the Palmyra Portrait Project corpus there are at present 289 portraits of priests (tab. 1).²⁴ Priests make up approximately ten percent of the total number of portraits in the database and approximately eighteen percent of the total number of male representations, which is significant. Furthermore, the number of depictions of priests increased over time: the largest concentration is found in the period between mid-second century CE and 272 CE.²⁵ The priestly representations from the funerary sphere can be divided into several clearly distinguishable groups. These are here listed according to number of representations:

- 1) Portraits on loculus reliefs (87)
- 2) Portraits on sarcophagi-lids and sarcophagi boxes (84)
- 3) Portraits on banqueting reliefs (which also functioned as loculus reliefs) (12)
- 4) Portraits on freestanding sculpture in the round (3)
- 5) Portraits on stelae-shaped loculus reliefs (2)
- 6) Portraits in ceiling decoration (2)

Another group, which needs more attention and is too complicated to discuss in detail here, is a group of 99 single heads. These belonged mostly

²² Parlasca 1988, 220 as well as Sadurska 1994.

²³ Raja 2015a and 2015b for discussions of the so-called banqueting tesseræ and their iconography. Also see Ingholt, Seyrig and Starcky 1955 for the most extensive corpus of the tesseræ which count more than 1,000 different types.

²⁴ The database statistics were calculated on 20th November 2015.

²⁵ See table 1. 272 CE is the point in time when Palmyra was sacked by the army of the emperor Aurelian and the funerary portraiture ceased to be produced. See Hartmann 2001 for an account of the history of Palmyra.

table 1: Table showing statistics of the representations of priests in Palmyrene funerary and non-funerary contexts.

Portraits of priests

	Funerary	Honorific	Religious/ Architecture	Total
Objects with portraits	250	6	7	263
Portraits in total	289	6	17	312

	Loculi	Stelae	Freestanding	Sarcophagi	Banquet reliefs	Heads	Ceiling deco- ration	Total
Objects with portraits	86	2	3	49	10	10	1	250
Portraits in total	87	2	3	84	84	12	2	289

Decoration of the priestly modus

Funerary portraits:

	Bust	Rosette	Round/ oval stone	Plain	Only wreath	Unknown	Total
Group I (1–150)	28	7	2	30	1	7	
Group II (150–200)	42	6	20	3		12	
Group III (200–273)	51	3	42	13		21	
Total	122	16	64	46	1	40	189

Honorific and religious portraits:

	Bust	Rosette	Round/ oval stone	Plain	Only wreath	Unknown	Total
Honorific	1		2	3			
Religious/Architecture	1		1	6		9	
Total	2		3	9		9	23

to sarcophagi scenes on lids and boxes or deeply cut loculus reliefs from which the heads have been removed before they went on the antiquities market. They need to be studied in more detail in order to be categorised and grouped into the already existing groups.

The largest group of priestly representations are found in the loculus reliefs. These comprise 87 priestly portraits. Of the loculus reliefs only four

represent individual priests in constellations with other individuals. One is a double relief showing two priests (a priest and his son), one is a double relief showing a priest and a child (his child?) behind the right shoulder of the priest, one is a relief showing a priest and his mother, and the last one is a relief showing a priest most likely with his sister and father.²⁶ The second largest group are representations of priests on sarcophagi. Of these there are 49 examples in the database, including a total of 84 priestly representations. Most often these banqueting scenes on sarcophagi lids show two or more priests in the same scene. Since these scenes are family constellations, either the father and a son or several sons are shown as priests. Up to five priests are depicted in some cases. Often the sarcophagi boxes were used to depict further family members, including priests. The third largest group is that of the banqueting reliefs. These come to a total of twelve. They are followed by the much smaller groups of freestanding sculpture (three examples), stelae (two examples) and ceiling decoration in tombs showing priests (two examples). The focus here will be on four distinct examples from the largest group, the loculus reliefs, in order to discuss what we may infer from these about depictions of Palmyrene priesthood in general.

3 The four loculus reliefs depicting priests in constellations

The 86 loculus reliefs depicting priests are interesting to turn to in terms of discussing schemes of representation of the priestly office. It is significant that in the large group of loculus reliefs we can count only four examples of priests shown in constellations with other individuals. The number is much higher for constellations in loculus reliefs without priests, such as in the case of constellations of wife and husband, wife, husband and child/children or even grandchildren and grandparents.²⁷ We may conclude from the pre-

²⁶ For the relief with the two priests see Colledge 1976, 249–250 as well as al-As'ad, Gawlikowski and Yon 2012, 165, no. 1 for the inscription. For the relief with the priest and the child see Colledge 1976, 248, Chabot 1922, 127, no. 13, Ingholt 1928, 107 as well as Heyn 2010, appendix 5, catalogue no. 4. Inscription: CIS 4118 and PAT 0467. For the relief with the priest and his mother see Ingholt 1928, 199–200, Colledge 1976, 250 and 258 as well as Parlasca 1988, 220, pl. 47d. For the relief with a priest, a woman (most likely his wife or his daughter), and another man (most likely his father) see Colledge 1976, 252 and 262. The inscription, which has been translated for the Palmyra Portrait Project by J.-B. Yon reads 'Image of Taime, son of Taime, Ya'qub ---. Alas! Image of Taime, son of M ---. Image of, --- daughter of, ---.'

²⁷ See Raja forthcoming a for a discussion of the various family groupings and representations in the Palmyrene funerary sculpture.

liminary survey that it was common in the *loculus* reliefs that priests were depicted alone, often accompanied by an inscription in Palmyrene Aramaic, which would attest to the genealogy of the family, but not to other family relations. Because of this situation, the four examples of *loculus* reliefs showing priests in constellations deserve closer attention, in order to discuss what they imply about priestly self-representation in Palmyra, family constellations, status and roles within Palmyrene society.

The *loculus* relief from the British Museum (fig. 1, database number: BM034), which depicts a priest and a child standing behind the right shoulder of the priest, is partly damaged.²⁸ It is therefore not possible to ascertain whether there was an inscription that would have served to identify the child originally. The relief is dated stylistically to between 100–150 CE.²⁹ The *loculus* relief has a smoothed background; to the right of the centrally positioned male person, a child is depicted holding a bird in the left hand and a bunch of grapes in the right. The right shoulder and head of the child are missing due to later damage of the relief. On the left side of the male person an inscription is visible. The central male person is shown frontally. His upper body is depicted from above the navel-area. The facial expression is stern; he has a broad forehead over which the *modus* protrudes far down towards the region of the eyes. The eye brows are cut and incised long lines, the eyelids are thick, and the eyes have incised pupils. The ears are protruding and large. The cheek bones are high. The nose is straight and slim; the mouth is slim as well, with well-shaped lips. The *modus* is decorated with a wreath with a central bust. The bust is damaged: it is not possible to say whether this was a depiction of another priest or of a young male person, which are the two bust motives typically found on the *modus* of Palmyrene priests. He wears a decorated cloak, which is fastened with a brooch on the right shoulder. Underneath the cloak a likewise decorated tunic is visible. In his right hand he holds a small libation vessel, in his left hand, an incense bowl. The child wears a long garment which is tied around the waist so that it folds over the middle.

This relief depicts a priest most likely in the company of one of his children. The person in the back is depicted in the typical garment and with the typical attributes of children as shown in Palmyrene funerary portraiture.³⁰ Nothing indicates that this figure would have been a temple servant and

²⁸ See above note 26 for references. For the inscription: CIS 4118 and PAT 0467. The inscription reads: 'Moqimu, son of Gadiâ, (son of) 'Atê'aqab, (son of) (Za)bdâ, the elder.'

²⁹ Colledge 1976, 248 and Ingholt 1928, 107.

³⁰ Currently the Palmyra Portrait Project database holds 233 portraits of children.

figure 1: Loculus relief depicting priest and child. At present in British Museum (I.N. BM 125033). Photo from the Ingholt Archive, Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen. Copyright: Palmyra Portrait Project.

figure 2: Loculus relief depicting priest and woman. Location unknown (database number in the Palmyra Portrait Project database: UNK032). Photo from the Ingholt Archive, Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen. Copyright: Palmyra Portrait Project.

not a child. Since we cannot know whether the child was identified by an inscription originally, the interpretation must be based on the comparative evidence from other depictions of children.

The present location of the loculus relief showing a priest and his mother is unknown (fig. 2, database number: UNK032), since it was auctioned off in 1963.³¹ The relief is dated stylistically to 150–200 CE.³² The relief depicts a priest and a female person. Over the left shoulder of the priest an inscription is visible. The body of the priest is depicted from the navel-area upwards.

31 Sotheby's 1st July 1963, auction, New York, auction catalogue number 37. See above note 26 for further references.

32 For the dating see Ingholt 1928, 119–120 as well as Colledge 1976, 250.

He wears a *modus* decorated with a wreath with a central bust depicting a younger male. His face is shown in clear lines, his eyebrows are cut in straight lines, his eyes are almond shaped, and his ears are slightly protruding. He wears a cloak which is fastened with a brooch on his right shoulder. Around the cloak a broad decorated belt is visible. His hands, held in front of his breast, are damaged, but traces of the libation vessel in his right hand and the incense bowl in his left are still visible. The female person to his right holds her left arm around him: it is placed on his left shoulder. Her right arm and hand, which are shown in an odd perspective and out of proportion, are placed on his right shoulder. She wears a cloak, which is pulled over her head and hair. However, strands of hair falling down on both sides of her shoulders are visible. So is her hair in the front. Her forehead is broad and her ears are protruding. The eyebrows are cut, as are the eyelids. She does not wear visible clothing under the cloak and the upper part of her chest is bare; on the left side there are incised lines, which imitate cuts. Her nose is straight and one line is visible on each side of the nose running in direction of the mouth. The lips are narrow. The inscription reads: 'Male, son of, ---bel son of Male. Alas! Aqame, his mother.'³³

In this case it is clear through the explicit inscription what the relation is between the two persons shown in the relief. The female person is the mother of the priest. Whereas it has been claimed that depictions of priests are standardised to such a degree that makes them disappointing as a bulk of evidence, this relief shows that variation was indeed possible through combining representations of more than one individual in one funerary relief.³⁴ In fact, it shows that deviation from the standardisation indeed must have had a large impact on the viewer of the relief. The mother, who is shown in a pose of mourning, with scratch marks on the left side of her breast from which blood presumably poured (fig. 3 for comparison), is a clear symbol of a strong expression of sorrow about the loss of a son.³⁵ Such depictions are known in other constellations in Palmyrene funerary sculpture, but this is the only example showing a priest and his mother.

The loculus relief showing two priests belongs to the Palmyra Museum in Palmyra (fig. 4, database number: PM500). It is stylistically dated to between

³³ Colledge 1976, 250 and 258 as well as Ingholt 1928, 119–120 for the relief as well as the inscription.

³⁴ Kaizer 2002, 235.

³⁵ Hvidberg-Hansen and Ploug 1993, I.N. 1025, p. 132 for a comparable constellation of a mother in a state of sorrow mourning her daughter. The mother has visible scratches and even blood pouring from the wounds is visible.

figure 3: Loculus relief depicting mother and daughter. Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen (I. N. 1025). Photo from the Palmyra Portrait Project. Copyright: Palmyra Portrait Project.

150–200 CE.³⁶ The loculus slab is smoothed in the background. The right-most male person is depicted as a Palmyrene priest. Behind him a so-called *dorsalium*, a piece of textile, is hanging. It is fixed with two rosettes from which a palm branch protrudes on each side. The male person wears a *modus* decorated with a wreath with a central rosette. His face has a longish shape, his right ear protrudes. The forehead is straight and his eyebrows as well as eyelids are cut. His nose is straight cut and his lips are narrow. He wears a cloak which is fastened on his right shoulder with a brooch. Although his hands, which he holds below his breast in front of him, are damaged, there are still traces visible of the libation vessel in his right hand and the incense burner in his left. The person to his left is also shown in a priestly garment. The head and face are damaged, but the shape of the *modus* is still clearly visible. So are the protruding ears. He wears a cloak, which is fastened on his right shoulder with a brooch. With his right arm he embraces

³⁶ Colledge 1976, 249–250.

figure 4: Loculus relief depicting two priests. Palmyra Museum, Palmyra (I.N. 2678/8984). Photo from Colledge 1976. Copyright: Colledge 1976.

the person to his right. His left arm and hand are visible in front of him below his breast and traces of the incense bowl are still visible. The inscription reads: ‘... son of Taibbol, alas. Ragna (?), his son, alas!’³⁷

The family relations in this relief are clearly expressed in the inscription and underlined by the iconography: the relief depicts a son and his father, both shown in their priestly attire. The father embraces his son, behind whom a *dorsalium* is shown. In this relief the inscription may, however, indicate that both individuals are dead, by the ‘alas’ at the end of both names. It is not clear who died first or whether the double relief indeed was put up in front of a double burial or whether it was only for the dead son, which the iconography seems to indicate by the more elaborate depiction of the son as well as the *dorsalium* in the background.

The last loculus relief depicts three persons (fig. 5). It is the only relief of the ones mentioned here which carries substantial colour traces. Gold, red and black colours are clearly visible. The relief is stylistically dated to between 200–272 CE, belonging to the latest group of dated funerary portraits from Palmyra.³⁸ The priest is depicted to the far left of the relief. He

³⁷ al-As’ad, Gawlikowski and Yon 2012, 165, inscription no. 1.

³⁸ Colledge 1976, 252 and 262.

figure 5: Loculus relief depicting priest, woman and man. Damascus, Syria. Photo from internet: <http://dgam.gov.sy/index.php>.

wears a *modus* decorated with a wreath with a central bust of a priest. The wreath has extensive traces of gold colouring. The eyebrows are sharply cut and black colour is visible on them. The eyelids and eyes are deeply cut and black colour is again visible both along the upper and lower eyelids and in the pupils. The nose is straight and the lips are narrow. The ears are protruding. He wears a himation into which his right arm is folded across his chest; his right hand grasps part of the himation. With his left hand he also holds a part of the himation. The inscription incised above his right shoulder and painted with red paint reads: 'Image of Taime, son of Taime, Ya'qub ---. Alas!'³⁹ In the middle of the relief in the background between the two front figures, a male person in himation is depicted. His hairstyle is typi-

³⁹ The complete inscription is translated by J.-B. Yon for the Palmyra Portrait Project. See below for the rest of the inscription.

cal of the third century CE with curls pulled down the front of his forehead. The ears are protruding, his eyes are cut and painted with black, his nose is straight and his mouth is small with narrow lips. The inscription above his right shoulder reads: 'Image of Taime, son of M---.' To his left and more forward, a female figure is visible. She is clad in a cloak that is pulled over parts of her head and hair and functions as a veil which she slightly pulls to the front with her left hand. Her right arm is folded in front of her body just below the breast. She wears an undergarment, tunic-like, that is richly decorated. She also wears elaborate jewellery: several necklaces, a brooch below her left shoulder, and several chains in her hair partly attached to her head-dress just visible underneath the cloak-veil. Her face is slim, her eyebrows and eyelids cut. Both eyebrows, lids and eyes are painted black. Her nose is straight and slim and her mouth is small and narrow. Her neck has several lines indicating her skin.

This relief represents the example which shows the greatest number of individuals. We here see a father (the person in the back, somewhat smaller than the front figures) depicted most likely with two of his children. The inscription seems to indicate that the woman depicted was not the wife of the priest, but the sister. She is not mentioned as 'wife of', but as 'daughter of', which is not common if she had been the wife of the male person to her right. Apart from the fact that this *loculus* relief shows a unique constellation – since it includes three individuals in a representation including a Palmyrene priest – it is furthermore interesting that the priest is not shown in the typical heavy cloak with a brooch holding together the garment. Here the priest is shown in an ordinary himation and without the symbols of his office, the libation vessel and the incense burner. He is only recognisable as a priest by the *modus*. This relief is furthermore the only *loculus* relief example of a priest shown with a sister.

These four unique examples of *loculus* reliefs depicting Palmyrene priests in group constellations, out of a total of 86 *loculus* reliefs, give food for thought regarding the methodological discussions about how to interpret visual culture and iconographic motives in general. Through the few deviating representations it is possible to say a great deal about the span of variety and choice, even within a group which at first sight appears standardised and homogeneous.

It is interesting to note that whereas both men and women are often depicted together with family members, priests are not. This is significant, since priestly representations make up about eighteen percent of the total number of male representations in the funerary sculpture. Priests were, moreover, the only group of men shown to be holding an office. However,

whereas it seems important for 'ordinary' men and women to be depicted with family members, often with accompanying inscriptions telling us about the genealogy and long line of the family, the priestly depictions in general seem void of the aspect which pertains to family members underlining their status. This may very well be due to the fact that they, on the one hand, were already of high status, through their priestly offices, and, on the other hand, because they would have been surrounded by further representations of priests within their close and extended families in the grave setting itself.⁴⁰ Family connections would certainly have enhanced their social status, but the fact that they were depicted as priests was a status symbol, which in itself carried a large meaning.

It is the combination of the amount of material (the large corpus of Palmyrene funerary sculpture) and the possibility of drawing statistically founded comparisons, combined with our knowledge of Palmyrene societal order, which allow for new basic methodological considerations that change our view of the meaning of Palmyrene funerary sculpture within their contemporary society. It is through the comparison and statistics of priestly representations within the larger group of Palmyrene funerary sculpture that the new dimensions arise. The priests are only shown with family members in four cases on loculus reliefs. In the case of representations on sarcophagi lids, however, priests are always shown together with family members and often with several generations of priests (fathers and sons). This discrepancy in the representation constellations in loculus reliefs versus sarcophagi lids shows that the reason that priests were not depicted with family members in the loculus reliefs was definitely not one which can be said to have been religious. It might to a much larger extent have pertained to the media in which the representations were done. In by far most cases, a loculus relief marked a single grave, though always within the context of a larger family tomb, some of which held up to 300 burials. So the individual depicted on the loculus relief would always have been situated within the wider context of the particular tomb complex. The sarcophagi representations in Palmyra came into being later than the loculus reliefs and only occur from the second century CE onwards. The sarcophagi were often placed in front of older loculi niches, even covering earlier funerary reliefs. The lids always depicted family scenes where family members in different combinations were shown. Often these lids also held representations of priests and some even held up to five representations of priests on one lid. Due to the sheer size of the sarcophagi-

⁴⁰ Raja forthcoming b for further considerations on the implications which the priestly representations carry, both in the loculus reliefs as well as the sarcophagi representations.

agi lids the medium invited representations of several individuals, and the motive, the so-called *Totenmahl* motive, was one which was widely spread in antiquity and used in many regions of the ancient world. This motive often included representations of several individuals from a family, but not always. In Palmyra, however, not one single sarcophagi lid depicts only one person. So the sarcophagi lids were in Palmyra reserved for depicting family constellations. The possibility for comparing the constellations within different media of Palmyrene funerary representations (loculus reliefs versus sarcophagi lids) is significant for our understanding of the four priestly representations in constellations in loculus reliefs.

As to the media, it can be concluded that sarcophagi lids were reserved for family constellations, including many of which show one or more priests (several generations). The priestly representations on sarcophagi lids in family constellations can be said to conform to the normal patterns of family constellations shown on the sarcophagi lids in Palmyra and in several cases underlining, through representations of several generations of priests on one lid, the hereditary nature of priesthood in Palmyra. In the case of priestly representations on loculus reliefs, however, we can conclude that the priestly representations do not conform to the standard patterns, since priests in this medium are only shown in group constellations in the four cases presented here. We see here a clear choice made by which emphasis is put on the representation of the individual priest. I argue that this choice pertains both to the fact that the reliefs were situated within family graves, which included numerous representations of family members of the priest, and to the most likely hereditary nature of priesthood in Palmyra, which would have been a status expression in itself. It was the combination of the setting of the reliefs within a larger tomb and the social status implications expressed by the priesthood which made the choice of individual priestly depictions possible and socially acceptable. However, it is the four outstanding cases presented here, which fall outside the normal pattern observed within the various groups of priestly representations in Palmyra, that let us begin to think about these implications.

4 Conclusion

Whereas scholarship until now has generally agreed that the depictions of Palmyrene priests are standardised and prosaic, it is clear that when examining this evidence in detail as a group and considering examples which deviate from the ordinary pattern, new ways of viewing arise, which funda-

mentally change our ways of gaining insight into the nature of Palmyrene priesthoods and their societal role. It might have been most common in the funerary loculus reliefs to depict priests alone, thus underlining the status which came with an office that was, most likely, hereditary. Since evidence does speak for the fact that these priesthoods were indeed hereditary, and given the fact that approximately eighteen percent of all male representations are priestly representations, this might truly have meant that it was not seen as important to underline family relations in the loculus reliefs, since *de facto* being depicted as a priest already underlined a certain family pedigree. However, through the evidence assessed above, it is also clear that in some cases family relations were deemed important to depict. Although there are only a very few examples of such constellations in the loculus reliefs, they display a wide variety, and not one is similar to the others. In another group, namely the sarcophagi lids and boxes, the depiction of family scenes and relations were the central elements. The loculus reliefs may in some cases now be interpreted as condensed family scenes or constellations.

However, the loculus reliefs also provide us with ways of understanding the material, which have not been possible until now. We may now deduce from inscriptions and iconography and the interplay between text and image that certain constellations imply certain relations, such as a man holding another man indicating father and son, a woman holding a man indicating a dead son or husband, a child in the background indicating a child of the person in the front and so on and so forth. Family mattered also for Palmyrene priests and we can now look beyond the standardisation and behind the scenes of the loculus reliefs, which most often only presented one side of the matter and need to be seen in the context of all groups of funerary depictions, including the large group of sarcophagi. In general, by studying these loculus reliefs and other groups of funerary sculpture, we may come closer to detailed interpretations of the iconography, which will let us see beyond the standardised gloss of the general imagery, therefore presenting an important body of material for methodological discussions.

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Religion in the Roman Empire

Volume 2 (2016), No.1

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2199-4463(201603)2:1;1-V