



MYSTERY OF THE FUNERARY RELIEFS OF PALMYRA (TADMOR) IN THE DESERT OF SYRIA*

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ABSTRACT

Throughout history, people were delighted to express their sense and availibilities on various types of arts by using different materials. Art was also the way in which people could reveal their possessions in both materially and morally. The tower tomb reliefs of Palmyra reflect the wealth, power and the eclectic taste of people of the city although the area looks unnatural for these possessions.

Extraordinary tower tombs with their unique architectural structure were mainly made of lime stone by looking austere from outside but quite surprisingly eclectically elegant with their marble and limestone reliefs inside. It can be derived from the reliefs that the religious art of Palmyra was woven out of many strands. In many superficial ways it is Greco-Roman but in detail and from pictorial subjects is 'oriental'. The compositions of the family and the individual men and women on the reliefs with their dress, jewellery, ornaments and household utensils reflects overwhelmingly Parthian and Mesopotamian, Anatolian effects.

The country of Syria is under political disorder nowadays and its cultural heritage is also endangered. The aim of this article (before any vanishment of these important cultural heritage), is to reveal how and to what extend the people of ancient Palmyra developed themselves in the middle of the Syrian desert and how much they reflected their own culture and wealth on the tower tomb reliefs of Palmyra.

Key Words: Palmyra, grave art, funerary reliefs, ornaments, wealth, women, cultural heritage.

*Bu makale Crosscheck sistemi tarafından taranmış ve bu sistem sonuçlarına göre orijinal bir makale olduğu tespit edilmiştir.

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SURIYE ÇÖLÜNDE PALMYRA'DAKİ (TEDMÜR) MEZAR RÖLYEFLERİNİN GİZEMİ

ÖZET

Tarih boyunca, insanlar farklı malzemeler kullanarak sanat eserleri üzerinde duygularını yansıtmaktan memnuniyet duymuşlardır. Sanat, aynı zamanda insanların sahip oldukları maddi ve manevi zenginlikleri ortaya koyma yoludur. Çevre tabii görünmese de, Palmyra kule mezar rölyepleri, bir zamanlar şehirde yaşayan halkın zenginlik, güç ve seçkin sanat zevkini ortaya koyması bakımından önemlidir.

Özellikle dışarıdan bakıldığında oldukça sade görünen ve kireç taşından yapılmış olan kule mezarlar, kendilerine özgü seçkin ve olağanüstü mimari yapılarıyla iç mekanlarında şaşırtıcı bir şekilde şaşaalı mermer ve kireçtaşı kabartmalarla süslüdür. Bu yapılar, Palmyra dini sanatının dışarıdan pekçok farklı etkiyle ilmek ilmek dokunduğunun göstergesidir. Pekçok bakımdan Greko-Romen özellikler taşıyan kule mezarlar, ayrıntılarında ve münferit bakımlardan doğulu özellikler taşımaktadır. Aile kompozisyonları, tek erkek ve kadın betimlemelerindeki elbise, takı ve süs eşyaları ile ev gereçleri İran, Mezopotamya, Anadolu etkilerini yansıtmaktadır.

Günümüzde Suriye siyasi bir çalkantı içindedir ve bu önemli kültür varlıkları da tehlike altındadır. Bu makalenin amacı, henüz bu eserler yok edilmeden, Suriye çölünün ortasında yaşamakta olan eski Palmyra halkının kendilerini nasıl geliştirdiklerini ve Palmyra kule mezar kabartmalarında kendi kültür ve zenginliklerini ne kadar yansıtıldıklarını ortaya koymaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Palmyra, mezar sanatı, mezar rölyepleri, takılar, zenginlik, kadın, kültürel miras.

Consize History of Ancient Palmyra

Palmyra¹ lie on the caravan trade route between Babylonia and the far east, and Syria and the west. This trade had passed through Mesopotamia during Seleucid period. At the end of the Seleucid power the route had fallen out of use in the late second and early first centuries BC, so that the tribes of the Syrian desert had seized the opportunity to capture the trade. Hence as the principal water springs of the desert Palmyra became important.² In the late first century BC the city and the area was linked by road to the Euphrates after attacked by Antonius.³

Although Pliny records that Palmyra was a buffer state between Roman and Parthian empires, it is difficult to say when Palmyra was annexed by the Romans. It can be said that

¹ The name "Palmyra" is a reminiscense of emperor Tiberius in AD 17-19 when the city was under Roman administration. Before the Roman rule, the city called "Tadmor" in Aramaic.

² Jones, A. H. M., *Cities of the Eastern Roman Provinces*³, Oxford University Press, (New York, 1998), 266; Grant, Michael, *The Climax of Rome*, Phoenix, (London, 1997), 18.

³ Jones, *Cities*, 266. For the early geography of Syria and the roads heading to Palmyra see Huxley, Julian, *From An Antique Land (Ancient and Modern in the Middle East)*, Crown Publisher, (New York, 1954), 153-154; Afetinan, *Eski Mısır Tarih ve Medeniyeti*, Türk Tarih Kurumu, (Ankara, 1992), 128-129; Gilliver, Kate, Goldsworthy, Adrian and Whitby, Michael, *Rome at War-Caesar and His Legacy*, Osprey Publishing, (Oxford, 2005), 196-197, 212 ff.

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Palmyra may have been annexed in the time of Augustus. In the time of Tiberius, the city was under military and administrative control of the Roman empire. The city was also honoured by Hadrianus.⁴

Syria in the Roman period was still important and a frontier province Palmyra (Tadmor) retained considerable degree of freedom. It was situated on an oasis dominating the most direct land route between the Syrian coast and the important Mesopotamian territories of the Great Parthian and Sassanian States. Its control of the transit trade greatly enriched the city, especially in the second and third centuries AD.⁵

In the time of Septimius Severus (AD 171-AD 211), Palmyra was benefitted from largesse of the emperor. Since emperor's wife was Syrian, Septimius Severus was naturally interested in the area but also the location of the city was strategically and economically important at the eastern edge of the Syrian desert.⁶ The city was raised to the rank of a colony which was granted *ius Italicum* by Septimius Severus. Palmyra retained a larger degree of independence depending upon its geographical and geostrategical location. There was a military commander in the city and a Roman troop was stationed in the roads between Sura and Damascus. Yet the city maintained its own army and it was allowed an unusual financial freedom. Although as a usual practise the frontier tariffs were collected by empires agents, the city probably collected or presumably disposed of, the revenue from the tariff in Palmyra.⁷ The most well known mercenaries, archers and bowmen of the Roman army especially in the third century was from Palmyra.⁸

In the time of Gallienus (253-68) the city had virtual independence as a large principedom under Odaenathus of Palmyra.⁹ Odaenathus' widow and successor Zenobia conquered Rome's eastern provinces but it ended in a very short period.¹⁰ The city reached the height of its zenith under queen Zenobia in the third century. Palmyra lost its importance after destruction of the city by Aurelianus (270) though in the sixth century it was existed.¹¹

The wealth of the city was reflected on plan and building structure of the city. Especially the construction programme of city was realised in the late first and second centuries in Palmyra

⁴ Jones, *Cities*, 267. Syrian merchants and travellers from Palmyra took up their residence even in the west in Dacia. See Cary, M. and Scullard, H. H., *A History of Rome (Down to the Reign of Constantine)*, St. Martins Press, (London, 1994), 458.

⁵ British Museum Guide, *The Treasuries of the British Museum*, designed by Alan Kitching, (London 1976), 246-247; Ramage, Nancy H. and Ramage, Andrew, *Roman Art*, (New Jersey, 1996), 244-245; Jones, *Cities*, 232. For the ancient economy of Palmyra see, Finley, M. I., *Ancient Economy*, University of California, (London 1999), 59. Diocletianus strengthened the frontier south of the Euphrates by the construction of paved road from Damascus northward via Palmyra to Sura on the river and by building forts on the frontier-route from Petra via Palmyra to Euphrates. See, Cary and Scullard, *A History of Rome*, 533.

⁶ Huxley, *Antique Land*, 144; Ramage and Ramage, *Roman Art*, 244.

⁷ See, Jones, *Cities*, 267, especially fn. 52; Grant, *Climax of Rome*, 18-19; British Museum Guide, *Treasuries*, 247. For the free cities under the Roman administration also see Palaz Erdemir, Hatice, "Roma'nın Anadolu'da İdarî Bir Meselesi: Bağımsız Şehirler", *ADALYA*, No: VII, (Antalya, 2004), 171-184, 171-184. For somehow limited freedom of regional administration under Roman rule see Cary and Scullard, *A History of Rome*, 492; Sherwin-White, A. N., *The Roman Citizenship*, Oxford University Press, (Oxford, 1996), 432, 440, 450-451.

⁸ Huxley, *Antique Land*, 152; Grant, *Climax of Rome*, 38.

⁹ For the relationship with Sassanians and the Roman administration of Palmyra in the time of Odaenathus see Gilliver, Goldsworthy and Whitby, *Rome at War-Caesar and His Legacy*, 212, 214, 254; Teixidor, Javier, "Palmyra in the Third Century", in Hillers, Delbert R. and Cussini, Eleonora, *A Journey to Palmyra: Collected Essays to Remember Delbert R. Hillers (Culture and History of the Near East)*, ed. by Eleonora Cussini, Brill, (Leiden, 2005), 181-226; Huxley, *Antique Land*, 155-156; Cary and Scullard, *A History of Rome*, 511; Grant, *Climax of Rome*, 6, 19-20, 25.

¹⁰ Huxley, *Antique Land*, 156-157; Cary and Scullard, *A History of Rome*, 511; Grant, *Climax of Rome*, 6; Teixidor, *A Journey to Palmyra*, 181-226.

¹¹ Huxley, *Antique Land*, 157; Jones, *Cities*, 268; Ramage and Ramage, *Roman Art*, 245; Grant, *The Climax of Rome*, 6, 40. See also OCD³, *Zenobia*; Teixidor, *A Journey to Palmyra*, 181-226; Ball, Warwick, *Rome in the East: The Transformation of an Empire*, Routledge, (London, 2000).

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when the city was in its splendor. A notable feature of town architecture in the long colonnaded streets which radiated outwards from the central square was placed in the city plan of Palmyra.¹² Originally the building materials of the city was mudbrick and limestone but during the Roman period public buildings were constructed from marble. This eclectic mixture in the building material structure looks unique and reveals emperors building program in the city.¹³ Palmyra restored from its destruction after Zenobia. Although emperor did not live in the east in the time of Diocletianus extensive military buildings and an imperial palace were constructed in Palmyra.¹⁴ Due to this eclectically unique feature in the middle of the Syrian desert the Antik city was denominated as the “heart of the desert”, “pearl of the desert” and “bride of the desert”.¹⁵

The Tower Tombs and The Reliefs of Palmyra

However of all the art and building programme, the most notable are the tower tombs and reliefs of the city.¹⁶ The religion and religious art of Palmyra reflects a mixture of Roman, Anatolian, Parthian and slightly Aramaic and Greek styles.¹⁷ This effect can clearly be seen especially on unique Palmyrene reliefs in Tombs, most of which come from the second century AD.

The principal families of Palmyra built themselves imposing tombs in the suburbs. There are mainly three types of graves in the middle of the desert but the most striking ones are multi storey building-like tombs. These commanding structures austere from outside but elegant inside and each storey contains mortuary niches or sarcophagi. These extraordinary type of sepulchre can easily be recognised in the middle of the desert of Syria with their heights like towers.¹⁸ By using limestone outside and marble inside the tombs were kept cool and they were ventilated with windows and niches that this hindered the dead body to purefy under the hot weather.

The tombs were adorned with gigantic marble statue composition of father or family all together. Mostly male or sometimes female ancestors of the family were depicted as lying and relaxing on the surface on their elbows.¹⁹ Similar representation were also embossed on limestone as sarcophagi lid.²⁰ This may show their tranquility in their earthly life as well as after life. Male

¹² Huxley, *Antique Land*, 145-146; Cary and Scullard, *A History of Rome*, 469; Gawlikowski, Michal, “The City of the Dead”, in Hillers, Delbert R. and Cussini, Eleonora, *A Journey to Palmyra: Collected Essays to Remember Delbert R. Hillers (Culture and History of the Near East)*, ed. by Eleonora Cussini, Brill, (Leiden, 2005), 44-73.

¹³ Ramage and Ramage, *Roman Art*, 245; Gawlikowski, *A Journey to Palmyra*, 44-73.

¹⁴ Grant, *Climax of Rome*, 104-105.

¹⁵ Ball, *Rome in the East*; Edwell, Peter M.; *Between Rome and Persia, The Middle Euphrates, Mesopotamia and Palmyra under Roman Control*, Routledge Monographs in Classical Studies, Routledge, New York, 2008, 40-41; Sahner, Christian, “The Temple of the Bride of the Desert”, *The Wall Street Journal*, 27 August 2011.

¹⁶ As a result of overseas trade of Palmyrene merchants some remains traced not only in Palmyra also in different parts of Roman world. An example found in South Shields in Britain. This was an elaborate tomb of Regina, British wife of Barates, a businessman from Palmyra. See Scullard, H. H., *Roman Britain (Outpost of the Empire)*³, (London, 1994), 142-143. See also Cussini, Eleonora, “Beyond the Spindle, Investigating the Role of Palmyrene Women”, in Hillers, Delbert R. and Cussini, Eleonora, *A Journey to Palmyra: Collected Essays to Remember Delbert R. Hillers (Culture and History of the Near East)*, ed. by Eleonora Cussini, Brill, (Leiden, 2005), 26-43.

¹⁷ For the early oriental saviour-god reliefs before Greco-Roman period see Grant, *Climax of Rome*, 88. Grant expresses that this hieratic posture was carried even to far east, India which the Greco-Budhist art in northern India looks quite similar to Palmyrene work of religious art. For the effect of interchange among the divinities of orient and the west see Carcopino, Jérôme, *Daily Life in Ancient Rome*, Penguin Books, (Middlesex, 1962), 144-152; Gawlikowski, *A Journey to Palmyra*, 44-73.

¹⁸ Huxley, *Antique Land*, 149-150; British Museum Guide, *Treasuries*, 246-247; Ramage and Ramage, *Roman Art*, 244-245; Jones, *Cities*, 232; Milleker, Elizabeth J., (ed.) *The Year One: Art of the Ancient World East and West*, Exhibition Catalogue, Metropolitan Museum of Art, (New York, 2000).

¹⁹ See picture 6.

²⁰ See picture 7 and 8. Placing an image of reclining figure of the deceased on the lid of sarcophagi originally began in the sixth century (in 520 BC) with the Etruscan practice and this was picked up by the Romans. This became a tradition

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or female ancestors were carved on the centre of the composition and their family members (like wife, husband, children, servants, friends etc.) were also sprinkled around the main figure as acting in their life. As an example to this, on one of the sarcophagi lid a man was depicted as reclining on his couch, supported by a round pillow at one end and holding a cup in his left hand. Five personal images were also carved and emphasized at the bottom of this figure as portraits which may probably belong to the friend and family circle of the deceased.²¹ This type of sarcophagi lids were traditionally and prevalently embossed for the wealthy in a unique fashion in Palmyra.

Each individual grave in the tombs was also provided with a stone portrait of the deceased, and their style is a strange and unique amalgam of eastern and western influences. These portraits were used for the graves as cover. Mostly reliefs are expressed only as portrait of a woman or a man but sometimes male or female portraits are decorated with the children of the family. These are the best known works of art from Palmyra carved on limestone to adorn large family chambers.²²

The most elaborate of these tombs have walls covered with relief portraits set in architectural frame. The figures are normally identified by the names of their fathers, as well as their own. They are worth comparing with the other statue portraits in the Roman world.²³

The early gravestone reliefs of Palmyra reflect an important picturesque view from history. They are unique their semi statue-like carving. It can be clearly observed that the artists of ancient period were mainly interested in certain patterns while carving the reliefs of the wealthy families. In general, face image of the death, the curves and wrinkles on the faces, the folds of clothing and cloth hangings behind figures, robes and hair patterns and the certain patterns in the hands and fingers were repeated on most of the reliefs.²⁴

Mostly face image of the people looks in a tranquil. Occupation or business of the person or the family can be observed on reliefs. Some Palmyrene women were busy with spinning and knitting yarn in their life that most of the women were embossed with yarn in their ambrace. This may show that although the families were wealthy, women still preoccupied with production of something or busy with trade side by side with their husbands as happened earlier in "Assyrian trade colonies" in Asia Minor in 1950-1750 BC's. Individually or together depicted men and women images reveal the exteriority of Palmyrene society. It can be understood from these that women were never kept separate from social life. Therefore, without any differentiation women and men delineated.²⁵

The types and shapes of clothings of Palmyrene people were embossed skillfully on the reliefs. It is not coincidence that men and women clothes look soft and well-fitting. The Palmyrene artists reflected oriental hot dessert climates affects while carving dresses of the people on reliefs. It may be guessed that the affluent people mainly wore silk or cotton garments since silk and textile was also produced in Syria.²⁶ The garments and looking of the men illustrate Anatolian,

on some parts of the Roman world. For this see Ramage and Ramage, *Roman Art*, 35-38; Milleker, *The Year One: Art of the Ancient World East and West*.

²¹ See picture 8. Picture 7 and 8 are good examples of the type in Palmyra. Similar examples can also be seen in different parts of the Roman world. See Ramage and Ramage, *Roman Art*, 35-38.

²² British Museum Guide, *Treasuries*, 246-247; Ramage and Ramage, *Roman Art*, 244-245; Jones, *Cities*, 232; Milleker, *The Year One: Art of the Ancient World East and West*.

²³ See picture 6. See also British Museum Guide, *Treasuries*, 246-247; Ramage and Ramage, *Roman Art*, 244-245; Jones, *Cities*, 232.

²⁴ See Cussini, *A Journey to Palmyra*, 26-43.

²⁵ Ramege and Ramage, *Roman Art*, 245-246.

²⁶ As Strabo explains Syria and environment as famous for silk, dye and dye works silk was widely used by well being people. Strabo, *Geography*, XVI. II. 23. See also Lewis Naphtali and Reinhold Meyer, *Roman Civilisation The Empire*

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Hellenistic, Aramaic, Persian and Roman influence. Ancient Roman world was status-conscious society, and nowhere was this more true than in the family, where every member -man, woman and child- knew their place. So on the reliefs that the toga men worn are the symbol of his “Roman citizenship” more Roman influence, the portrait of the men varied, some bearded like Aramaic and others clean shaven. Hair of the men were curly on almost all reliefs which shows the peoples’ the main ethnic background as Aramaic.

Women richly dressed and their dresses and ornaments also reflect the mixture of Anatolian, Hellenistic, Aramaic, Persian, Egyptian and Roman as well as Indian.²⁷ Most of the women worn cloak or shawl over their heads embellished with different types of jewellery on their foreheads. Hair of the women which drops on two sides of the heads looks wavy on almost all reliefs.²⁸

Jewellery of the women were also emphasised on the reliefs that may reveal the taste and the wealth of the people. As it is known throughout history the symbolic power of ornamental jewellery and ornamentation has taken on the function of both the social identity and the status of the individual within society. So the funerary reliefs of the women of Palmyra displayed the wealth and power of their families with the fashion jewellery and ornaments of the time. This unnatural wealth mainly came from the increasing trade between the Roman and Parthian Empires. Yet it is very interesting that the people of Palmyra reflected their wealth and status on the stone carvings rather than depositing their adornments and gold ornaments in their tombs.²⁹ The types of the ornaments emphasized on the carvings are various as neck rings, earrings, chain necklaces, chest ornaments, different shapes of bracelets (from wrist up to shoulder) and different types of head wearings.

(Selected Readings), volume II, third edition, Columbia University Pres, (New York, 1990), 82; Carcopino, *Daily Life in Ancient Rome*, 197; Cussini, *A Journey to Palmyra*, 26-43.

²⁷ Huxley, *Antique Land*, 149, 158; Saito, Kyohite, “Palmyrene Burial Practices From Funerary Goods”, in Hillers, Delbert R. and Cussini, Eleonora, *A Journey to Palmyra: Collected Essays to Remember Delbert R. Hillers (Culture and History of the Near East)*, ed. by Eleonora Cussini, Brill, (Leiden, 2005), 150-165.

²⁸ See Cussini, *A Journey to Palmyra*, 26-43; Saito, *A Journey to Palmyra*, 150-165.

²⁹ Ramege and Ramage, *Roman Art*, 245-246. For the ornamental art see Türe, Altan, *The Language of Symbols (in Jewellery and Gem Stones)*, Goldaş Cultural Publications (2004), 15; Türe, Altan, *The Story of Ornamental Artefacts*, Goldaş Cultural Publications IV, (2005), 146; Saito, *A Journey to Palmyra*, 150-165.

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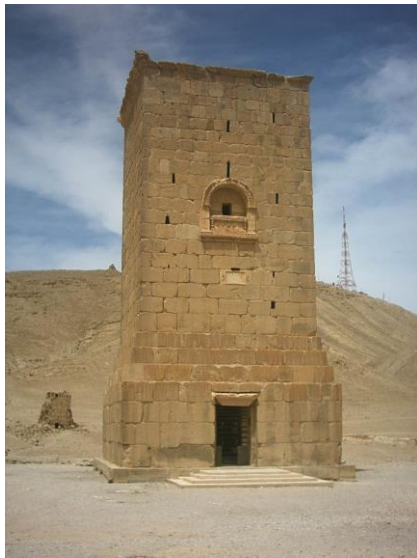
Phographs were taken by Doç. Dr. Hatice P. Erdemir and Dr. Halil Erdemir in 27 April 2005



Picture 1. Palmyra Plain



Picture 2. An underground Grave



Picture 3. A multistorey tomb in Palmyra Desert



Picture 4. A niche of a sarcophagus in a tower tomb

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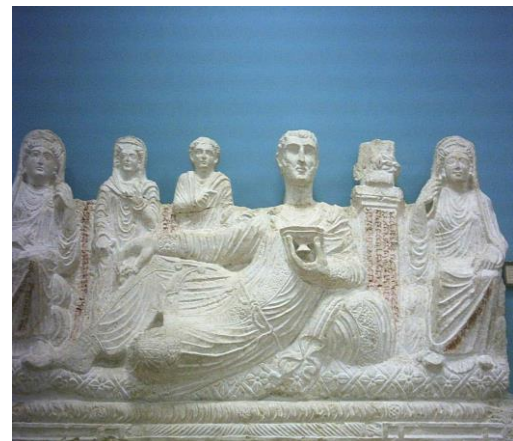
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Picture 5. Inner walls of a tower tomb decorated with reliefs of the family



Picture 6. Statue of reclining figure of the deceased



Picture 7-8. Two different example of semi-statue reliefs from tower tombs in Palmyra Museum in Syria

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Picture 9-10. Individual gravestones with a man relief reclining on a mattress on his elbow holding a cup on his left hand and a woman relief from Palmyra Museum



Picture 11-12. Individual gravestones with busts of two different women from the tombs from Palmyra Museum in Syria

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Picture 13-14. Gravestones with bust of two individual women from the tombs from Palmyra Museum in Syria

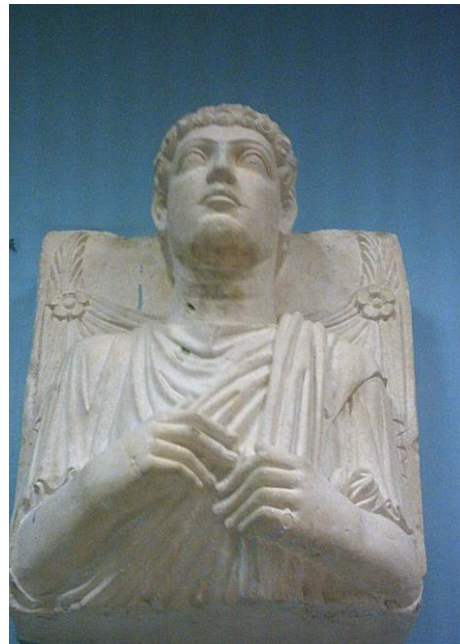


Picture 15-16. Gravestones with bust of two individual women from the tombs from Palmyra Museum in Syria

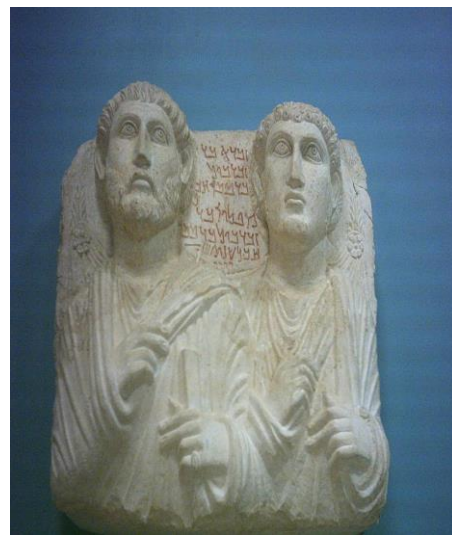
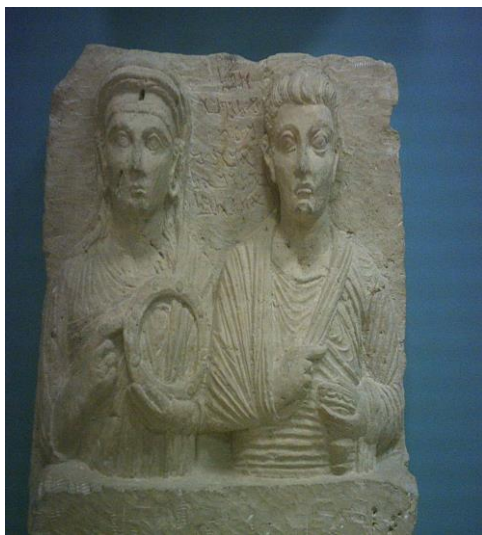
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Picture 17-18. Two individual gravestone with a relief of a women and a man from the tombs from Palmyra Museum in Syria

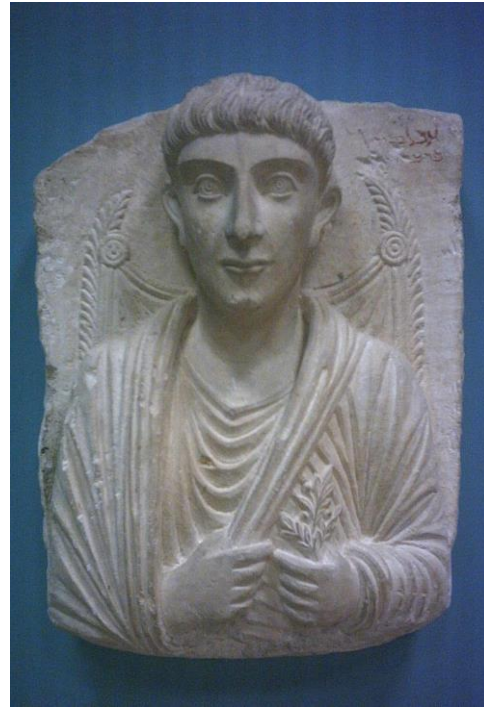


Picture 19. Gravestone with a relief of a couple Picture 20. Gravestone with a relief of two men

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Picture 21. Gravestone with bust of a man Picture 22. Gravestone with bust of a man



Picture 23-24. Two individual gravestones with bust of a young (AD 181) and an old men (second or third century AD) from the tombs of Palmyra purchased in 1902-In the Art of Metropolitan Museum in New York

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