

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

---

Textile Society of America Symposium  
Proceedings

Textile Society of America

---

2002

## The Women of Palmyra—Textile Workshops and the Influence of the Silk Trade in Roman Syria

Cynthia Finlayson  
*Brigham Young University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf>



Part of the [Art and Design Commons](#)

---

Finlayson, Cynthia, "The Women of Palmyra—Textile Workshops and the Influence of the Silk Trade in Roman Syria" (2002). *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*. 515.  
<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf/515>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Textile Society of America at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

## The Women of Palmyra--Textile Workshops and the Influence of the Silk Trade in Roman Syria

*Cynthia Finlayson, Ph.D., R.P.A.*

*Assistant Professor-Art History & Curatorial Studies  
Brigham Young University*

By the second century A.D., the oasis empire of Tadmor, Syria (Roman Palmyra) had eclipsed Nabataean Petra to the south in Jordan as the premier trading conduit for the exotic goods of Asia, India, and China as they found their way by caravan and ship to the hungry markets of the West and Rome. Palmyra functioned as the only viable source of water, salt, and pasture for all large trading expeditions as they ventured across the Northern Syrian Desert to the Mediterranean ports of Antioch, Tyre, Sidon, and Aleppo. Sensuous silk was among the most prized of the exotic goods these brave entrepreneurs transported along the dangerous routes from the East to the ports of the Levant.<sup>1</sup>

The exact date at which silk first appeared in the caravans heading west from China, India, and Persia is open for debate. One thing however is certain. If silk crossed the northern deserts of Greater Syria, it was forced by geography and climate to pass through the ancient emporium of Tadmor, renamed "Palmyra" by the time of Roman annexation.

The extant physical evidence for silk at Palmyra dates primarily from remnants discovered and utilized as funerary offerings and mummy wrappings for the bodies of the wealthy citizens interred in Palmyrene tower tombs. These types of tombs date from the first century B.C. to the second century A.D. (See Figure 1). They contrast architecturally from the later underground hypogea and temple tombs that developed under Roman influences from the second century A.D. until the destruction of Palmyra by the Emperor Aurelian in A.D. 242/243.<sup>2</sup> These time periods, however, represent a unique era in

---

<sup>1</sup> The route of trade from China, Japan, India and Central Asia to the West was as its height from the 2nd century B.C. and then sporadically through the 14th century A.D. Trade items included not only silk but also cotton, wool, linen, jade, horses, gems, pearls, lacquer wares, tea, incense, spices, glass, and jade as well as ceramics, bronze, and slaves. Goods found their way along a chain of merchant-caravanners. In these early eras, no one merchant or caravan enterprise was seemingly able to transverse the complete length of the Silk Road from East to West. Merchandise traveled from one point to the next, being sold, resold, or traded, and then moved forward along a route deemed the safest by the caravan leader. This added to the expense and the eventual high cost of certain goods, especially silk, in the markets of the West and Rome.

<sup>2</sup> All remnants of textiles stem from numerous tombs and Tower Tombs in the Valley of the Tombs/Western Necropolis in Palmyra. These include tombs No. 7, 13, 44, 46, 51, 65, 69 and the tower tombs of Atenatan, Kitot, Iamblik and Elahabel. The tower tombs have produced the best extant examples of silk. See Andreas Schmidt-Colinet, Annemarie Stauffer, and Khaled al-As'ad, *Die Textilien aus Palmyra* (Mainz: Verlag Phillipp von Zabern, 2000) 1-2. See also Andreas Schmidt-Colinet, "The Textiles from

world history when the stability of the caravan routes was improved in the West by the rising political power of Rome and its client provinces in the Near East, while in China, the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.-A.D. 220) brought political unity and improved security to many regions in the East. Additionally, the kingdom of Gandhara controlled many of the routes of Central Asia in Afghanistan and parts of India. These political events conjoined to bring more Asian silk through Palmyra on its way to destinations in the markets of the Mediterranean Basin, but silk was especially sought after in the streets of imperial Rome.

While the impact of silk on Rome itself has often been a focus of previous studies, there are many questions that remain unanswered concerning the effects of the silk trade on the indigenous textile industries of the eastern caravan emporiums themselves and specifically upon the famous desert kingdom of Palmyra. Did the silk trade influence the adaptation or adoption of Oriental textile patterns and processes within indigenous Syrian workshops? How deep was that penetration? Did the silk trade impact economic incentives related to the production of local Syrian textiles such as those of the ancient and long established industries of wool and linen production? Since women produced many textiles, how did the silk trade affect their status and the nature of their indigenous craft industries?

Palmyra provides us a unique opportunity to explore some of these questions. The wealthy entrepreneurs of Palmyra used their vast caravan wealth to create lavish tombs that acted as perceived conduits of resurrection to the next life. For the individual Palmyrene, social status revolved around not only clan and tribal affiliation but also religious membership in the major pagan cults of the city and the ability to provide one's family with a lavish house of residence for the eternities. As previously mentioned, Oriental silks were utilized especially in Palmyrene funerary contexts where they were cut into long strips with which to wrap individual mummies. These bodies had been chemically treated with bitumen and spices to preserve the flesh and the outward appearance of the deceased for as long as possible. While the chemical composition of the Palmyrene mummification process differed from that of the Egyptian, many Palmyrene mummies remain viable in their preserved state today. Additionally, the Palmyrenes created beautiful funerary portraits with accompanying genealogies to honor their deceased ancestors and speed their way to immortality (Figure 2). In the Palmyrene cosmos these portraits were essential to the resurrection ceremonies of many cults of the city and associated with the eternal status of the soul. Most importantly, these portraits today represent the only extensive surviving collection of community funerary portraiture with accompanying inscriptional genealogies extant from a tribally based urban context in the ancient classical Near East. Significantly, the women's portraits in Palmyrene tombs are the more lavishly attired, far surpassing their male counterparts. Specifically, the headdress styles of Palmyrene women present modern scholars with an

---

Palmyra," *ARAM* 7 (1995): 47-51. The over 2,000 textile fragments from Palmyra make it one of the largest extant groups of ancient textiles from known archaeological contexts. The architectural style of the tower tombs with their relatively dry interiors above ground may have contributed to the preservation of silk remnants in these earliest tombs. By comparison, later underground tombs have not yet revealed any extant silk finds, but their environments are less conducive for textile preservation.

unprecedented wealth of information concerning the status of women in the ancient Near East and the influence of the silk trade upon their lives.

In previous studies I have pointed out that matriarchal Aramaic and Arab tribal traditions remained strong in Palmyra even into the Roman era.<sup>3</sup> Palmyra's role as a strategic military bastion of the Eastern Roman Empire coupled with the need for caravan trade as an economic life's blood, guaranteed the high status and vibrant role that women played in the political and social life of the oasis. Women were not only active in the indigenous textile industries of the region, but owned properties, played roles in the political and economic affairs of the city, and through carefully orchestrated marriages guaranteed wealth and access to trade routes through clan alliances to regions possibly as far away as Gandhara, India. Additionally, funerary genealogies seem to indicate that some Palmyrene women may have practiced a traditional tribal matriarchal marriage arrangement called the *mot'a* marriage in which the woman chose a male spouse for a specified period of time in order to produce children for her clan or tribe.<sup>4</sup> The marriage was short-term, and the resultant children belonged to the woman and her associated clan, not to the male partner. This meant that certain women had the potential to become the founders of their own clans and families. Significantly, the last ruler of Palmyra was a woman, the famous Queen Zenobia, whose armies conquered a significant portion of the Eastern Roman Empire before being defeated by the Emperor Aurelian in 272/273 A.D. Zenobia was not only known for her beauty but for her intellectual accomplishments and her bravery in battle as well as in hunting wild beasts.<sup>5</sup> There is epigraphic evidence that Zenobia's marriage to her famous warrior/husband, Odaenathus, was of the *mot'a* type.<sup>6</sup> Palmyrene women were thus enfranchised through economic and military necessity, as well as cultural custom, with many potential avenues of influence within the political and economic endeavors of this important oasis emporium. Since their headdress styles and the motifs utilized to decorate the textiles from which they were constructed seem to represent a matriarchal tradition passed down through the female members of an extended family over time, these headdresses provide us an important tool in attempting to ascertain the impact of the silk trade on Palmyra's indigenous textile industries. In other words, while other garments depicted within the portraits of the Palmyrene deceased could originate from imported sources outside of Palmyra, the traditional nature of Palmyrene female headdresses with their associated clan and family styles and motifs are potential markers of indigenous textile designs and evolving textile traditions.

---

<sup>3</sup> Cynthia Finlayson, "Veil, Turban, and Headpiece-Female Status and Funerary Portraiture at Palmyra, Syria," (Ph.D. diss, University of Iowa, 1998).

<sup>4</sup> An excellent discussion concerning this type of marriage arrangement can be found in W. Robertson Smith, *Kinship and Marriage in Early Arabia* (Boston: Boston Press, 1903), viii-x.

<sup>5</sup> *Scriptores Historiae Augustae*, trans., D. Magie (London: W. Heinemann, 1922-1932) Trig. Tyr. 30, 1-3 and 12-22.

<sup>6</sup> *Scriptores Historiae Augustae*, Trig. Tyr. 30, 1-3 and 12-22.



Theoretically if we trace their development over time, we may be able to ascertain some of the answers to the questions asked above with relation to the impact of the silk trade on indigenous workshops in Syria, especially with relation to the depth of penetration of silk motifs and construction within Syrian textile production and women's roles in relation to this process.

Palmyrene funerary portraits indicate that textile production was an important aspect of the work of women at Tadmor. The distaff and spindle are common funerary attributes held in the hands of the portraits of deceased Palmyrene women from the earliest extant funerary stelae of the late 2nd century B.C. down to the more elaborate portraits of the third century after Christ. The distaff and spindle in Palmyrene contexts, however, may have had dual symbolism within the tomb. The great pagan female deity of Syria as described by the Roman author Lucian in *de dea Syria* was depicted in sculpture with a distaff indicating her powers to weave cosmic destiny and control Fate.<sup>7</sup> Weaving in Palmyrene contexts was thus seen both as an economic necessity but also carried with it cosmic associations to the roles of powerful female deities. The distaff in tomb contexts not only commemorated the deceased's industry in life but also their association in death with the powerful Near Eastern goddesses of resurrection and renewal.

The major indigenous Palmyrene sources for fabric weaving included animal wools from camels, sheep and goats, as well as flax for linen. Cotton (from Egypt, India, Mesopotamia and Arabia), wild silk (Tussah silk whose irregular fibers had to be twined), and domesticated fine Chinese 'mulberry' silk were all imports to the region. Significantly, the more expensive and finer 'mulberry' silks from Chinese sources are the most common in Palmyra and outnumber wild silk examples given present archaeological evidence.<sup>8</sup> This is an indication of both the wealth of the Palmyrenes which enabled them to procure such fine fabrics, but also this fact acts as an indicator of the predominance of the caravan routes to Palmyra which favored links to domesticated Chinese silk sources during the 1<sup>st</sup> century B.C. to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D. over that of Tussah silk from India and other areas of Asia. This also indicates that Palmyrene women were exposed to the visual potential of Chinese weaving and embroidery embellishments on a larger scale than other textile craft shops in other regions. Additionally, fine woolen and/or animal hair garments are quite numerous in Palmyrene tombs, another indication of indigenous Palmyrene wealth as well as probable local wool production. Significantly, fragments of textiles from tomb contexts within Palmyra indicate that by the 2nd century A.D., silk was increasingly utilized along with wool to produce finely woven garments.<sup>9</sup> Silk was also particularly utilized for decorative strips, which were sewn on the garments themselves.<sup>10</sup> Some finer woolen and linen garments

---

<sup>7</sup> Lucian, *de Dea Syria*, trans. H. Attridge and R. Oden (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1976) 43. In this passage, Lucian mistakenly identifies the Syrian goddess as Hera.

<sup>8</sup> Schmidt-Colinet, *Die Textilien aus Palmyra*, 13.

<sup>9</sup> Schmidt-Colinet, *Die Textilien aus Palmyra*, 2

<sup>10</sup> Schmidt-Colinet, *Die Textilien aus Palmyra*, 13. Significantly Schmidt-Colinet

were treated with expensive purple dyes and may have also been decorated with sewn on pearls from the Persian Gulf. Indeed, the quality and quantity of fabric dyed garments utilized at Palmyra is noteworthy along with the quantities of fine Chinese silk and silk embroidery.<sup>11</sup> Purple dye, one of the most expensive of pigments, is found more often in Palmyrene textile remains than in any other location in the Mediterranean during this time period.<sup>12</sup> Ironically, as noted by the research of Dr. Andreas Schmidt-Colinet, the finest and the most complicated of woven garments originate from the older tombs and the quality and quantity of fine garments declines over time.<sup>13</sup> This may be due to increasing political problems along the trade routes created by the rise of the Sassanian Persians after the 2nd century A.D. coupled with the discovery of sea routes to the south that eventually allowed trade to bypass the interior desert routes. Large fragments of silk are extremely rare, but a few examples have been found carefully wrapped and placed next to Palmyrene mummies.<sup>14</sup> It may possibly be assumed that silk was thought to bestow not only economic status to the deceased, but aspects of spiritual power of renewal associated with the soul's re-emergence in paradise.<sup>15</sup> Significantly, silk thread seems also to have been imported to Palmyra for weaving and for embroidery. In many instances garments seem to have been increased in value by the addition of silk embroidery either somewhere along the caravan's path before arriving at Palmyra, or within Palmyra itself.<sup>16</sup> It is important to note, however, that the extant remnants of Chinese patterned and embroidered silk that have been recovered from Palmyrene tombs and other contexts originated from the Han Dynasty and thus share a number of

---

notes that fine mixed textiles consisting of silk and wool are only known in ancient Near Eastern contexts from examples originating in Palmyra where the warp was silk and the weft of fine wool. Such garments have not yet been found in the caches of other ancient garments in archaeological sites. He further notes on page 14 that the weaving traditions with relation to direction and shape of fiber twists at Palmyra represent a completely different tradition similar to garment fragments found at Masada.

<sup>11</sup> Schmidt-Colinet, "The Textiles from Palmyra," 47. Most dyestuffs were either produced from local sources of indigenous plants or insects, or imported from areas as diverse as the coasts of the Levant and the borders of India.

<sup>12</sup> Annamarie Stauffer, "Textiles from Palmyra-Local Production and the Import and Imitation of Chinese Silk Weavings," *Palmyra and the Silk Road, International Colloquium 1992 Les Annales Archéologiques Arabes Syriennes* (1996): 425.

<sup>13</sup> Schmidt-Colinet, *Die Textilien aus Palmyra*, 2.

<sup>14</sup> Schmidt-Colinet, *Die Textilien aus Palmyra*, 5.

<sup>15</sup> In China there is evidence that the production of silk from larvae through cocoon was allegorical to the potential of the human soul for renewal.

<sup>16</sup> Schmidt-Colinet, *Die Textilien aus Palmyra*, 19.

characteristics including an emphasis on curvilinear designs and a predominance of vegetal and floral motifs and patterns. These stylistic influences coupled with the visual potential of silk embroidery, I believe, were powerful influences on the development of Palmyrene textile female headdress motif designs produced by the craft shops of Palmyrene women. While Dr. Schmidt-Colinet assumes that embroidery played an insignificant role in the Near East until the Islamic conquest, I believe that a careful study of Palmyrene headdress designs refutes that assumption.<sup>17</sup> Many garments and headdress textiles may have been decorated with silk embroidery within Palmyra, itself. Indeed, while there are distinct differences between Chinese embroidery techniques and iconography as contrasted with the embroidery motifs found within the headdresses of Palmyrene women, I believe that the visual and tactile influences of the silk trade impacted the evolution of certain aspects of Palmyrene female headdress embellishments over time. Most importantly, Palmyrene female funerary headdress motifs seem to indicate that the visual potential of silk thread embroidery impacted indigenous Syrian textile crafts with more power than the actual designs of imported Chinese silk fabric.

Significantly, the most common silk textiles to find their way to Palmyra seem to be those constructed with plain canvas weaves or in some cases, Han Dynasty damasks, probably produced by centrally controlled workshops in China.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, it has been suggested that the classical construction of the Chinese monochrome silks which are found in Palmyra were originally produced with export to the West specifically in mind since their construction provided a potential for later embroidery embellishment.<sup>19</sup> With the above information in mind it is important to analyze the changes in construction and motif design exhibited within the female Palmyrene headdresses over time and to note their evolution in presentation and style.

One of the earliest extant female Palmyrene headdress types is that of Type A-Plain which consisted of a head scarf with possible turban rolls over which a head veil was often worn. The textile headscarf appears to be undecorated. This is one of the oldest headdress types found within Palmyrene funerary contexts and the style predominately appears in the Southeast Necropolis of the city in dated contexts of before 95 A.D. A related type, designated Type A-Striate hosted carved or incised lines as a pattern for the headscarf as it lay across the front forehead. Extant paint indicates that these were once decorated with pigments. All date from c. 90-220 A.D. making them one of the most popular and longest utilized headdress styles in Palmyra. Significantly, however, genealogies indicate that this simple headdress style was still worn by some women from the clans of the southeastern side of the city even after their marriage into clans of the northern side of the city whose women favored more elaborate and costly headgear.

A similar type of headdress is designated at Type A-Raised Striate. All date to from c. A. D. 50 down to A.D. 250. An example from the Hypogeum of Zabd'ateh and

---

<sup>17</sup> Schmidt-Colinet, *Die Textilien aus Palmyra*, 29.

<sup>18</sup> Schmidt-Colinet, *Die Textilien aus Palmyra*, 27-28.

<sup>19</sup> Schmidt-Colinet, *Die Textilien aus Palmyra*, 48.

Moqimu indicates that the striates were once painted with pigments and their raised tactile presentation may indicate that the original textile was embroidered rather than woven with this pattern.

Another group of Type A headdresses host motifs on the headscarf that are variations of patterns in which an 'X' or 'X'-crosshatch pattern plays a dominant role. A woven textile fragment from the Tomb of Kitot also bears similarity to this type of motif in Palmyrene contexts, but many Palmyrene female headdress textiles appear to be embroidered, not woven, i.e., their presentation seems raised above the body of the fabric, not woven as part of the fabric itself. Significantly, these 'X' motifs were widely utilized throughout the ancient Mediterranean Basin and the Near East in textile designs. They are still utilized in Palestinian embroidery today where the 'X' is called the 'muqass' or the scissors. A study of the historic and artistic uses of the 'X' motif throughout the Mediterranean and ancient Near Eastern Region indicates that it was often associated with the garments of powerful female deities who controlled destiny and cut the threads of Fate.<sup>20</sup>

The next variation of the Type A headdress style adds numerous types of vegetal designs to the exposed portions of the fabric headscarf. These textile types begin to appear c. 110-150 A.D. and continue to the destruction of the city in A.D. 272/273. They include the fig leaf or branch, the palm frond and palm fronds with dates, the olive branch, miscellaneous types of either smooth four petaled flowers or roughly serrated flowers, possible acanthus fronds, and a few as yet unidentified vegetal leaves possibly associated with indigenous plants utilized for textile dyes. Significantly, the fig, palm, and acanthus were all ancient Near Eastern motifs associated with the rejuvenating and sexual powers of pagan goddesses. None of these motifs can be linked to Chinese precedents or visual sources. Dr. Schmidt-Colinet has pointed out the similarities between some of these motifs, utilized on other Palmyrene fabrics, with motifs also utilized in Palmyrene architecture. However, many motifs utilized in Palmyrene funerary headdress styles are not found in architectural counterparts. These include the palm frond and dates, the bud with wings (possibly of Egyptian influences), and an aloe-like vegetal leaf that may represent a popular plant utilized for dye. All of the above motifs begin appearing in Palmyrene headdress textiles by the beginning of the first century A.D. but are found neither in extant Chinese fabrics nor in known Palmyrene architectural precedents. However, the increasing use by Palmyrene weavers and embroidery craft shops of curvilinear forms and vegetal motifs over those of the previously favored geometric and static forms should be noted.

---

<sup>20</sup> A study of many Minoan through Hellenistic era depictions of powerful female deities in the Eastern Mediterranean indicates that the 'X' or crosshatch motif played an important role in the decoration of their garments in cultic contexts. Excellent examples of this include the famous Snake Goddesses of Knossos (if authentic), the depiction of a powerful female deity on the neck of a Cycladic Relief Pithos from Thebes (c. 680-670 B.C.) in R. Hampe, *The Birth of Greek Art* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1981) Plate 441; a plaque from a dress-pin originating from the Sanctuary of Artemis Orthia at Sparta (mid 7<sup>th</sup> century B.C.) Plate 354 from the same source; as well as a pin depicting a 'Mistress of the Animals' (c. 650 B.C.) from Rhodes, same source Plate 322.



By c.150-220 A.D. a complex flower with serrated edges is added to the Palmyrene repertoire. (See Figure 3) and headdresses were becoming more extensively embellished with head chains inset with semi precious jewels and elaborately tied turbans. The headband and/or scarf borders are more deeply carved with raised patterns that seem to indicate embroidery rather than just a flat weave. The motifs have texture, dimension, and increased curvilinearity which mimic known Chinese embroidery fragments extant from Palmyra and other find sites. In other words, while the motifs of Palmyrene female headdress styles seem indigenous to Palmyra, the increased use of curvilinearity in design and the embroidery of vegetal and floral motifs may have been influenced by the import of Chinese fabrics and most particularly silk embroidery examples and thread. Many of these motifs in Palmyrene funerary contexts are predominantly popular in the Southeastern and Southwestern Necropoli although a few exist in the Valley of the Tombs on the north side of the city particularly in the Salamallat and Yarhai Tombs, families noted for their trade and caravan ventures with confirmed marriage ties to the clans of the Southeastern Necropolis.

Plain multi-petaled flowers are also popularized before A.D. 239, but these types seem to be utilized most often by the clans buried on the north side of the city in the Valley of the Tombs. Again the sculptural presentation seems to indicate a raised surface as in fine embroidery rather than a flat weave. Indented 'X's' in patterned fields with distinct centers also appeared (c. A.D. 160) combined with vegetal fronds.

An extremely elaborate series of headdresses begin to appear in Palmyra around A.D. 200. These are composed of richly decorated caps that cover hair rolls in a similar manner to head caps in Gandharan sculpture from Northern India and Afghanistan. The fine workmanship of the motifs coupled with high texture of the patterning indicates embroidery rather than a weaving process (See Plate 4). Indo-Scythian Caps with textile strip embellishments also appear in some of the latest portraits from Palmyra dated to c. A.D. 225-250 from the area of the Allat Temple. These types of headdress styles coupled with the Gandharan-like styles discussed above indicate increased physical alliances between Palmyra and the Gandharan Region. This is also indicated by another headdress style that appears in Palmyra c. 150-220 A.D. composed of tiered wrapped decorated hair bands, complicated hair wraps, and the use of a central headdress broach in the shape of a half crescent with a central circular orb. The same embellishment appears in the headdresses of females in the sculptures of Gandhara. Interestingly, this style appears in Palmyra on the portrait of Ba'a, daughter of Ate'aqab, daughter of the (clan) Haumal, from the Hypogeum of Salamallat in the Valley of the Tombs. The Haumal clan is one of the oldest families noted by inscription from Palmyra and associated with the maintenance of the sacred Efqa Spring. Ba'a must have been married into the Salamallat Family but the origins of her mother and thus her headdress style are open for conjecture given its affinities to the Gandharan regions. Perhaps Ba'a was the child of a marriage that guaranteed the Haumals and Salamallats access to the routes to the East.

By A.D. 220 the height of the overland Chinese silk trade to the Roman West was coming to an end. On this date the Han Dynasty collapsed in the East triggering an era of chaos in China that lasted for over 350 years. In Syria wars had already begun in A.D. 161, first with the Parthians and later in A.D. 230 with the rising power of the Sassanian Persian Empire. In A.D. 241 Hatra fell and the Sassanians pushed further East into

Gandhara. In A.D. 256 Dura-Europus on the Euphrates and Antioch on the Mediterranean coast were despoiled by Sassanian forces, disrupting the safety of the trade routes from East to West. A short hiatus occurred between A.D. 257-271 with the rule of Odenathus and Zenobia in Palmyra, but by A.D. 272-273 Palmyra lay in ruins, besieged and pillaged by the Roman troops of Aurelian who sought to quell Queen Zenobia's brief attempts to bring order to the chaotic Eastern Provinces and claim the title of 'Augusta' for herself. By this time Goths and Huns were also moving in to the Near East from the areas around the Black Sea. These political events may help explain the brief blossoming of Gandharan and Indo-Scythian influenced headdress motifs and styles in Palmyra during the mid third century A.D. Certainly, many Gandharan merchants with family and trade relations with Palmyra may have fled increasing Sassanian incursions in the East to the marginal safety of the Tadmor Oasis utilizing marriage connections as a conduit of relocation and settlement during the reigns of Odenathus and Zenobia. It is probable that they brought valuable caches of silk to maintain their livelihoods. The final destruction of Palmyra by the Romans, in A.D. 272/273 however, left such a huge political vacuum in the region that Roman interests in the East never fully recovered. The far eastern provinces of the Roman Empire would never recover their former wealth or influence until the advent of the Islamic era when trade with China and Asia was again reborn and re-established to its full potential.

If we closely examine the headdress styles and motifs of Palmyrene women as representative of indigenous textile weaving patterns and possibly a burgeoning embroidery craft industry at Tadmor, we must conclude that the sources of inspiration for these developments were multifaceted and complex. This reflects Palmyra's role as a trade emporium connecting the Hellenized world with present-day Afghanistan, India, and China. Dr. Schmidt-Colinet has noted the similarities between some Palmyrene textile patterns with complimentary examples of architectural embellishments utilized in late Hellenistic and Roman era buildings in Palmyra and the added probable influence of pattern books which circulated throughout the Roman East.<sup>21</sup> Certainly some headdress motifs including the simple and more complex serrated flowers as well as some vegetal leaf compositions fall into this category. Another colleague, Professor Stauffer, has pointed to the similarities between some of the textile patterns of Chinese silks and the development of few Palmyrene fabric patterns.<sup>22</sup> What is evident from a careful examination of female Palmyrene headdresses, however, is the development and evolution of indigenous motifs in matrilineal headdress textiles which seem influenced by the visual potential of silk embroidery rather than an outright adaptation or adoption of Chinese motifs. From c. 100 A.D. onward, many Palmyrene headdress motifs become increasingly curvilinear, not geometric in style, reflecting the patterning preferences of Han Dynasty silk damasks and embroidery as well as other embroidered fabrics embellished along the routes of the Silk Road. Additionally, the motifs of Palmyrene headdresses and caps become increasingly tactile and complex indicating the probable use of embroidery techniques utilized to embellish flat woven textiles. This influence seems to have been spurred on in part by imported fabrics, including silks and silk embroidery which were passed along the Silk Routes heading for the Western markets of

---

<sup>21</sup> Schmidt-Colinet, "The Textiles from Palmyra," 51.

<sup>22</sup> Stauffer, 425-430.

the Mediterranean. Consequently many Palmyrene female headdress embroidery embellishments were of indigenous origin but of oriental stylistic inspiration. The curvilinearity of Han Dynasty embroidery styles and the focus on vegetal patterning in clothing eventually became an important part of indigenous Palmyrene female craft shops but these influences were utilized to reinterpret indigenous Palmyrene clan and cultic agendas. Significantly, the influences of the silk trade thus allowed Palmyrene women to express their cultic and clan affiliations through headdress embellishments with greater visual power and artistic authority. These motifs were thus strongly associated with female status and matriarchal traditions. The utilization of silk thread to also improve the quality and texture of indigenous woolen garments also increased their re-sale value in the provincial and Mediterranean markets of the Roman Empire. The increased wealth and status of textile and related caravan ventures is reflected in the elaborate headdresses adopted by Palmyrene women after A.D. 150 and helps explain their continued elaborate presentation even during years of political turmoil from A.D. 200 onward.

The ancient tradition of silk embroidery lingered in the Near East through the Byzantine Period increasing in importance again during the Islamic conquest and the re-opening of intensive trade with China and Asia. The powerful visual heritage of silk embroidery as a marker of clan and regional identity remains potent within the textile crafts of Near Eastern women even today thanks to the intrepid carriers of silk along the ancient Silk Route to the West during the Classical Period, and the ingenious craft shops like those of the *women* of Palmyra.

## Bibliography

- Finlayson, Cynthia. "Veil, Turban, and Headpiece-Female Status and Funerary Portraiture at Palmyra, Syria." Ph.D. diss., University of Iowa 1998.
- Gawlikowski, Michal. "Palmyra and Its Caravan Trade," *Palmyra and the Silk Road, Intern. Conference Palmyre 1992, Annales Archéologiques Arabes Syriennes*, 42 (1996): 139-145.
- Graf, David. "The Roman East from the Chinese Perspective," *Palmyra and the Silk Road, Intern. Conference Palmyre 1992, Annales Archéologiques Arabes Syriennes*, 42 (1996): 199-216.
- Lee, E. *China 5000 Years-Innovation and Transformation in the Arts*. New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1998.
- Loewe, M.. *Ways to Paradise: The Chinese Quest for Immortality*. London: George Allen and Unwin, 1979.
- Munsterberg, H. *Symbolism in Ancient Chinese Art*. New York: Hacker Art Books, 1986.
- Pfister, R. *Textiles de Palmyre I-III*. Paris: Les Éditions d'art et d'histoire, 1934-1940.
- Schmidt-Colinet, Andreas. "The Textiles from Palmyra," *ARAM* 7 (1995): 47-51.
- Schmidt-Colinet, Andreas, Stauffer, Annamarie, al-As'ad, Khalid. *Die Textilien aus Palmyra*. Mainz: Verlag Philipp von Zabern, 2000.
- Stauffer, Annamarie. "Textiles from Palmyra. Local Production and the Import and Imitation of Chinese Silk Weavings," *Palmyra and the Silk Road, Intern. Conference Palmyra 1992, Annales Archéologiques Arabes Syriennes*, 42 (1996): 425-430, and Fig. 1-8.



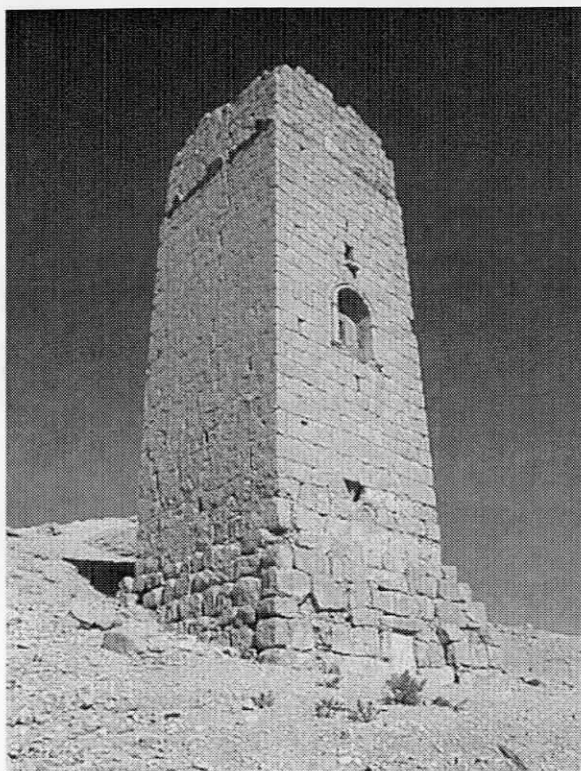


Figure 1 –Tower Tomb, Palmyra, Syria:  
1<sup>st</sup> Cent. A.D. Photo: C. Finlayson



Figure 2 - Palmyrene Female Portrait  
from the Bariki-Mubarik Tomb: SW  
Necropolis; c. 180-230 A.D. Photo: C.  
Finlayson.



Figure 3-Palmyrene Female Portrait  
from the Hypogeum of Zebida, Son of  
'Ogeilu, SE Necropolis: c. 150-200 A.D.  
Photo: C. Finlayson.

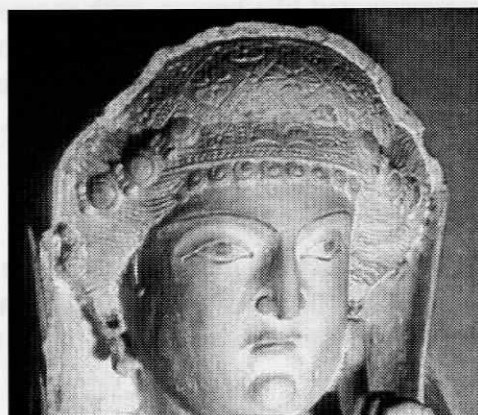


Figure 4-Palmyrene Female Portrait with  
Gandharan Style Cap; Salamallat Tomb;  
Valley of the Tombs; Palmyra, Syria; c.  
200-230 A.D. Photo: C. Finlayson.