

Revision of the role of tesserae and their connection to banquets in Palmyrene temples¹

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Abstract

This paper deals with the issue of the Palmyrene tesserae and their attribution to the cultic banquets. It focuses on the epigraphic, iconographic as well as on the archaeological evidence to demonstrate a new approach concerning the objects seeing them as an administrative and legal tool. Furthermore, treated are the priests and their role of symposiarchos, distribution and share of food and the archaeological context of discovering the small clay objects in the territory of this Syrian city of the Roman times (1st century BCE – 3rd century CE).

Keywords: Palmyra, banquets, temples, Near East, Syria, administration.

Résumé

Le sujet principal de cet article est le cas des tessères de Palmyre, petits objets en argile ou en métal et leur rôle dans la vie religieuse dans la ville antique d'époque romaine (1er siècle av : n.è. – IIIe siècle de n.è.). L'auteur se fonde sur les sources épigraphiques, iconographiques et archéologiques pour démontrer une nouvelle approche à ce sujet en voyant les tessères comme un outil d'administration et de droit. L'article présente le rôle de symposiarche, distribution des aliments et le contexte archéologique de trouvailles des tessères à Palmyre.

Mots clés : Palmyre, banquets, temples, Proche-Orient, Syrie, administration..

ملخص: يتناول هذا البحث مسألة القطع التدمرية وتصنيفها ضمن اللائم الطقسية. يركز البحث على الأدلة النقوشية والرمزية بالإضافة إلى الأدلة الأثرية لتقديم نهج جديد يعالج هذه القطع على أنها أدوات إدارية وقانونية. ويُسلط الضوء أيضًا على دور الكهنة كسمبوسيارخوس، وعلى توزيع ومشاركة الطعام، بالإضافة إلى السياق الأثري لاكتشاف هذه الأشياء الصغيرة المصنوعة من الطين هذه المدينة السورية في عصر الرومان (القرن الأول قبل الميلاد - القرن الثالث الميلادي).

الكلمات الرئيسية: تدمر، ولائم، معابد، الشرق الأوسط، سوريا، إدارة

The excavations at Palmyra of around a century resulted in a great collection of small terracotta objects labeled in the literature as tesserae and explained as the entrance tickets to ritual banquets (Gnoli 2016, Raja 2015, Raja 2020, Kubiak-

Schneider 2022).² This theory was launched in the early research on Palmyra in the 1930ies and 1950ies and is still maintained by the majority of scholars (Gawlikowski 2022). It is based on numerous objects presenting a scene of a priest of a couple of priests reclining on the banquet bed, so called banqueting tools like vase and ladle, and on specific vocabulary referring to the banquet. However, this topic is covered by a relatively small percentage of the entire collection of these clay objects. Therefore, this paper provides an alternative view of the function of tesserae and their connection to the cultic banquets at Palmyra and approaches the tesserae from a new angle treat-

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² A new corpus of tesserae, beyond RTP, is in preparation : Bobou, Kubiak-Schneider, Raja, Steding & Yon in preparation.

ing them as a complex material serving multiple purposes.

1. TESSERAE AND PRIESTS

A large collection of about 2000 small terracotta or clay tokens provides scraps of information concerning names and images of priests, names of cultic associations, names and images of gods, images of animals (camels, lions, bulls, sheep, scorpions, fish), items like a ladle or vase and representations of temples. The imagery which accompanies these tesserae is as diverse as the forms of the objects. One finds round objects similar to coins, rectangular, temple shaped, triangular, etc. Most of them bear a stamping. Comparing them with the local funerary sculpture Marielle Pic suggests to date them between the 2nd and the 3rd century AD (Pic 1993, 82-83). On the other hand, also the 1st century AD cannot be excluded, as it was then, when the city's main sanctuary of Bel was built. The latter was a place where a great number of tesserae was found (Sommer 2021, 37-46). But the question of chronology of these small objects must remain unsolved, while we cannot exclude either the existence of tesserae in the Hellenistic times while there are some analogies from the Hellenistic Seleucia-on-the-Tigris and Susa (McDowell 1935; Wallenfels 1996; Guillaume 1982).

The priests are represented either in the form of a bust or head or in the reclining pose (Raja 2015 and Raja 2016). The latter attitude went to be synonymous with banqueting. What is interesting, none of the tokens presents an image of a female ritual operator, all the reclining persons and the busts are male wearing the characteristic head piece for the Palmyrene priests. Does it mean that the women were not allowed to participate at the banquets? Not necessarily, the images of priests reclining can refer to a special ritual profession described as *symposiarchos* in Greek and *rb mrzḥ*³ and which can be translated as a chief or headmaster of the cultic association *marzeḥa* (Gawlikowski 2022, 290, Gnoli, 2016, 31-41).³ There we can assume that this priesthood rank was re-

served for men. One needs to keep in mind, that we dispose of only a fragmentary view on the religious life of Palmyra.⁴ It was the most noble and high ritual office associated with many Palmyrene gods such as Bel, Baalshamin, Belastor and Arsu (Gawlikowski 2022, 289-290). A Palmyrene *symposiarchos* was elected every year and within his duties he was the leader of rites, responsible for sanctuary and distribution of foodstuff during the feasts (PAT 0991). He also contributed with his own money to the ritual celebrations (Gawlikowski 1990, 2605-2658). When it concerns the headmaster (Aram. *rab*) of the *marzeḥa* of the god Bel, this function was combined with that of high priest (*archieus*). RTP 33 preserves the name of a chief of such a *symposion* called Bolḥa, son of Ḥayran: BWLḤ' BR ḤYRN RB MRZḤ'.⁵ When it concerns the chief of the *marzeḥa*, we know about 31-32 names of such officials concerning the cult of Bel (Gawlikowski 2022, 293; Yon 2002, 240-244; Milik 1972, 221-239). The tessera presents him as a man wearing a priestly cylindrical hat and with a drinking cup in his hand, manifesting his position as a priest. In addition, many more tokens present a priest resting on a banquet bench. This image is analogous to the statues or reliefs showing the priests and their families in the banquet scene, in the reclining position on the pillows and holding the cups in their hands, but in a funerary context (Raja 2016, 128-132). Among the representations on the tesserae, the banquet scene is not prevailing in the entire corpus of the clay tokens from Palmyra. It can refer to the function of a *symposiarchos* itself, naming him and representing him in the banquet pose. In such a context, it could have played a role of an identification tag which might have been used sometimes as to vote (Kubiak-Schneider 2022, 81-82). Some of the tesserae bear a stamp, most probably attributable to the depicted person, and therefore connects these objects to the sphere of administration and management rather than to the tickets for the cultic meal. It is more likely to give evidence for who was a priest at a given moment. Besides, being a priest involved directly in the ritual activities and entitled to obtain the temple share – paid in goods, a sort of a salary, for his duties (Kubiak-Schneider 2022, 82-83). To the duties of a priest or a collegium of priests belonged: making provisions, delivering food, providing items for the festivals and ceremonies as well as organizing the feasts (Kubiak-Schneider

³ This term is very much discussed and there is still no straight definition. It is attested in the Ugaritic, Phoenician, Aramaic (also Syriac) and Hebrew texts. Recently, M. Gawlikowski pointed out that it refers in Palmyra more to the institution, a cultic association, a meaning (and vocalization different from Hebrew *marzeah* which I adopt in this paper.

⁴ Palmyra is archaeologically known in 20-25% and the rest still remains not discovered.

⁵ All translations are made by the author.

2022, 82-83). The Palmyrene temples should be seen through the lens of the “temple community”, a well-organized socio-economic institution (Sterba 1976, 16), based on the traditions of being associated by a family to the temple and on the system of prebends (Kubiak-Schneider 2022).

2. EVIDENCE FOR THE BANQUETS?

The Palmyrene tesserae contain also references to the measurements of bread, oil or beverages. For instance, RTP 39 contains the symbol of a big crater and two pitchers. The inscription determines that it concerned a portion of one and a half measure of wine. Distribution of fermented drinks is confirmed also on the tesserae RTP 694-698, defining the half measure of the beverages. Beside the fermented drinks and meat also the oil was offered during or for a sacred feast, according to the two tesserae RTP 160 and 161.

The other important aspect was the distribution of the meat which was an important part of public rituals (Kaizer 2008, 179-193). It was a natural consequence of sacrifice, which consisted in burnt-offering, especially the animals. There are tokens with images of quantity of food and the short texts talking about the foodstuff brought to the temples, maybe also spent for banquets. Tessera RTP 252 deals with the feast of god Ma’anu, which was celebrated on the 16th August (Teixidor 1979, 83; Seyrig 1937, 372-378). On the side “a” of the tessera figures a short Palmyrene inscription: M’NW| T[W]R’| BNY ŠM’WN BKL ‘D ŠLM (translation: Ma’anu – a beef. Beni Shima’on. For the whole feast. Peace!) This round token informs that a beef was donated to the deity Ma’anu by a family or association for the entire festival. An inscription (Seyrig 1937, 372) treats about a ritual distribution of meat during the feast of Ma’anu. That inscription says that a benefactor offered the amount of 400 denarii for distribution of meat for all invited that day (i.e. 16th of Loos refers to 16th August) to have a ritual meal with the god Ma’anu. The direct references to the festivals are however very rare in the Aramaic inscriptions from the Roman and Parthian period (Cohen 1993).

What can be misleading in the reading of Palmyrene tesserae and in understanding their usage and function is the polysemic meaning of the scenes and formulas published on these small objects. Being limited by space, they present a frag-

ment of a whole jigsaw puzzle: that’s why there are ambiguous formulations which are difficult to gather by a modern scholar. Of course, all the references to food can be theoretically seen as banquet meal, but it can be as well a notice of the personal share of oil, meat, bread, etc. The same as the images or textual references to the ritual tools like jugs, ladles and cups. However, they can refer to portions, rations distributed after the sacrifices.

What cannot be underestimated at the tesserae of Palmyra is, that the presence of stampings can be seen as a tool of legal identification and sort of a signature. In this way, they would have been issued for a distinct person who then signed it with his own stamp ring, marking a transaction. In such circumstances, the tesserae had rather an economic and legal function within the management of a temple.

3. ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT OF TESSERAE

The tesserae were found spread around over many different parts within the territory of the ancient city of Palmyra. There are two big clusters: first is the temenos of the temple of Bel and second is the temple of Arsu.

When it concerns the cluster from the temple of Bel, numerous tesserae were discovered in the drains beside a construction identified as a banquet hall (Will 1997, 873-887, Raja 2020, 248.). However, a question arises: if the objects found in the drainage happened to be there intentionally, left out of use by the participants (Raja 2020, 248) or if it was an action of cleaning the temple and adjacent buildings after the political and religious changes in Palmyra after 272 CE? Imagining that the participants left them just as they were found, it would make the use of the banquet hall difficult because of a stuck drain. They might have been thrown there when the temple and the adjacent buildings in the temenos lost their primary function.

The second place is the temple of Arsu. During the excavations of this building the Syrian archaeological mission found a jar filled with 125 rectangular tesserae attesting the name of the deity and the image of a camel (As’ad, Briquel-Chatonnet, Yon 2005, 4). The jar itself could have been a storing “folder” for the tesserae and was

used as ordering the labels of what belonged to the temple (Kubiak-Schneider, 2022, 83).

It might have been sort of an archiving practice, especially that many tesserae attest the term *smk'*, interpreted until now solely as a banquet, but having also another, not so obvious, meaning: depositary of payment. We are still lacking an archive: either cultic or municipal. Maybe the presence of the stamped (or not stamped) tesserae are the hint leading to identifying such a place?

4. CONCLUSIONS

The discussion in this paper shows that a definite attribution of the tesserae to the ritual banquet is not as sure as it is postulated in the research on Palmyra. I doubt that the tesserae were only tickets for the entrance to banquets. They do not represent or mention other people than the cultic agents involved in the rituals, so the ones who had absolute right to dine with the gods and they did not need any invitation. Tesserae definitely referred to the priest or priests in charge of the organization of the meal and the goods. They could have been whether a sort of memory token, identification tag, mark of a transaction or a label for the goods or for administration purposes.

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