

Palmyra



Palmyra (/pæl'maɪrə/ pal-MY-rə; Palmyrene: 𐤓𐤕𐤍𐤕𐤕𐤓 ("Image of city name written in Palmyrene script"), romanized: Tadmor; Arabic: تَدْمُر, romanized: Tadmur) is an ancient city in the eastern part of the Levant, now in the center of modern Syria. Archaeological finds date back to the Neolithic period, and documents first mention the city in the early second millennium BC. Palmyra changed hands on a number of occasions between different empires before becoming a subject of the Roman Empire in the first century AD.

The city grew wealthy from trade caravans; the Palmyrenes became renowned as merchants who established colonies along the Silk Road and operated throughout the Roman Empire. Palmyra's wealth enabled the construction of monumental projects, such as the Great Colonnade, the Temple of Bel, and the distinctive tower tombs. Ethnically, the Palmyrenes combined elements of Amorites, Arameans, and Arabs. The city's social structure was structured around kinship and clans, and its inhabitants spoke Palmyrene Aramaic, a variety of Western Middle Aramaic, while using Koine Greek for commercial and diplomatic purposes.

REGION AND CITY LAYOUT

Layout

The city of Palmyra lies 215 km (134 mi) northeast of the Syrian capital, Damascus;^[12] along with an expanded hinterland of several settlements, farms and forts, the city forms part of the region known as the Palmyrene.^[13] The city is located in an oasis surrounded by palms (of

which twenty varieties have been reported).[8][14] Two mountain ranges overlook the city: the northern Palmyrene mountain belt from the north and the southern Palmyrene mountains from the southwest.[15] In the south and the east Palmyra is exposed to the Syrian Desert.[15] A small wadi, al-Qubur, crosses the area, flowing from the western hills past the city before disappearing in the eastern gardens of the oasis.[16] South of the wadi is a spring, Efqa.[17] Pliny the Elder described the town in the 70s AD as famous for its desert location, for the richness of its soil,[18] and for the springs surrounding it, which made agriculture and herding possible.[note 2][18]

Palmyra began as a small Neolithic settlement near the Efqa spring on the southern bank of Wadi al-Qubur.[20] The much later Hellenistic settlement of Palmyra was also located near the Efqa spring on the southern bank of Wadi al-Qubur.[20] It had its residences expanding to the wadi's northern bank during the first century.[16] Although the city's walls at the time of Zenobia originally enclosed an extensive area on both banks of the wadi,[16] the walls rebuilt during Aurelian's reign surrounded only the northern-bank section.[21][16] Most of the city's monumental projects were built on the wadi's northern bank,[22] among them is the Temple of Bel, on a tell which was the site of an earlier temple (known as the Hellenistic temple).[23] However, excavation supports the theory that the tell was originally located on the southern bank, and the wadi was diverted south of the tell to incorporate the temple into Palmyra's late first and early second century urban organization on the north bank.[24]

Etymology

Records of the name "Tadmor" date from the early second millennium BC;[1] eighteenth century BC tablets from Mari written in cuneiform record the name as "Ta-ad-mi-ir", while Assyrian inscriptions of the eleventh century BC record it as "Ta-ad-mar".[2] Aramaic Palmyrene inscriptions themselves showed two variants of the name; TDMR (i.e., Tadmor) and TDMWR (i.e., Tadmor).[3][4] The etymology of the name is unclear; the standard interpretation, supported by Albert Schultens, connects it to the Semitic word for "date palm", tamar (תמר),[note 1][7][8] thus referring to the palm trees that surrounded the city.[8]

The Greek name Παλμύρα (Latinized Palmyra) was first recorded by Pliny the Elder in the 1st century AD.[9] It was used throughout the Greco-Roman world.[7] It is generally believed that "Palmyra" derives from "Tadmor" and linguists have presented two possibilities; one view holds that Palmyra was an alteration of Tadmor.[7] According to the suggestion by Schultens, "Palmyra" could have arisen as a corruption of "Tadmor", via an unattested form "Talmura", changed to "Palmura" by the influence of the Latin word palma (date "palm"),[1] in reference to the city's palm trees, then the name reached its final form "Palmyra".[10] The second view, supported by some philologists, such as Jean Starcky, holds that Palmyra is a translation of "Tadmor" (assuming that it meant palm), which had derived from the Greek word for palm, "palame".[1][8]

An alternative suggestion connects the name to the Syriac *tedmurtā* (ܬܕܡܪܬܐ) "miracle", hence *tedmurtā* "object of wonder", from the root *dmr* "to wonder"; this possibility was mentioned favourably by Franz Altheim and Ruth Altheim-Stiehl (1973), but rejected by Jean Starcky (1960) and Michael Gawlikowski (1974).[9] Michael Patrick O'Connor (1988) suggested that the names "Palmyra" and "Tadmor" originated in the Hurrian language.[1] As evidence, he cited the inexplicability of alterations to the theorized roots of both names (represented in the addition of -d- to tamar and -ra- to palame).

LANGUAGE, AND SOCIETY

People

At its height during the reign of Zenobia, Palmyra had more than 200,000 residents.[note 3][42] The earliest known inhabitants were the Amorites in the early second millennium BC,[43] and by the end of the millennium, Arameans were mentioned as inhabiting the area.[44][45] Arabs arrived in the city in the late first millennium BC.[46] Zabdibel, who aided the Seleucids in the battle of Raphia (217 BC), was mentioned as the commander of "the Arabs and neighbouring tribes to the number of ten thousands";[47] Zabdibel and his men were not actually identified as Palmyrenes in the texts, but the name "Zabdibel" is a Palmyrene name leading to the conclusion that he hailed from Palmyra.[48] The Arab newcomers were assimilated by the earlier inhabitants, used Palmyrene as a mother tongue,[49] and formed a significant segment of the aristocracy.[50]

The classical city also had a Jewish community; inscriptions in Palmyrene from the Beit She'arim necropolis in Lower Galilee confirm the burial of Palmyrene Jews.[51]

During the Roman period, occasionally and rarely, members of the Palmyrene families took Greek names while ethnic Greeks were few; the majority of people with Greek names, who did not belong to one of the city's families, were freed slaves.[52] The Palmyrenes seem to have disliked the Greeks, considered them foreigners, and restricted their settlement in the city.[52] During the Umayyad Caliphate, Palmyra was mainly inhabited by the Banu Kalb.[53] Benjamin of Tudela recorded the existence of 2000 Jews in the city during the twelfth century.[54] Palmyra declined after its destruction by Timur in 1400,[55] and was a village of 6,000 inhabitants at the beginning of the 20th century.[56]

LANGUAGE

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Until the late third century, Palmyrenes spoke Palmyrene Aramaic and used the Palmyrene alphabet.[69][70] The use of Latin was minimal, but Greek was used by wealthier members of society for commercial and diplomatic purposes,[71] and it became the dominant language

during the Byzantine era.[72] There are several theories explaining the disappearance of the Palmyrene language shortly after the campaigns of Aurelian. The linguist Jean Cantineau assumed that Aurelian suppressed all aspects of Palmyrene culture, including the language, but the last Palmyrene inscription dates to 279/280, after the death of the Roman emperor in 275, thus refuting such a theory.[73] Many scholars ascribe the disappearance of the language to a change in society resulting from the reorganization of the Eastern Roman frontier following the fall of Zenobia.[73] The archaeologist Karol Juchniewicz ascribed it to a change in the ethnic composition of the city, resulting from the influx of people who did not speak Aramaic, probably a Roman legion.[21] Hartmann suggested that it was a Palmyrene initiative by nobles allied to Rome attempting to express their loyalty to the emperor; Hartmann noted that Palmyrene disappeared in the written form, and that this does not mean its extinction as spoken language.[74] After the Arab conquest, Greek was replaced by Arabic,[72] from which, although the city was surrounded by Bedouins, a Palmyrene dialect evolved.[56]