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Palmyra and Hatra: “Civic” and “Tribal” Institutions at the Near Eastern Steppe Frontier

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The recent war in Iraq and its aftermath show once more that the West faces virtually insuperable difficulties and misunderstandings when dealing with societies which structurally are entirely different from itself. The bonds of kinship loyalties and the division of society into clans and families appear somewhat enigmatic to political strategists, trained in law and economics. In the helplessness of conflict and war what contribution can the historical sciences and anthropology make? Without wishing to overemphasise the importance of our academic disciplines, I would suggest that they can help to shape the seemingly chaotic, unstructured field of cultural contact (of which war and post-war are doubtless pivotal elements) between different social formations by means of ideal types in the Weberian sense.

Two such ideal types are the antagonistic concepts of “civic” vs. “tribal” societies, which implicitly underlie most studies of nomadism and so-called segmental societies. Two assumptions, likewise common and wrong, go along with them. Firstly, it is taken for granted that civic and tribal elements are mutually exclusive, i. e. that they cannot co-exist within one social entity. Secondly, most scholars presume that tribal patterns are bound to nomadic societies, while sedentary, i.e. urban, ones are organised according to civic principles only.

What do “tribal” and “civic” respectively mean? I would suggest that in tribal societies the reference points of collective identities, as well as of political loyalties, are groups formed by kinship coherence, whether real or assumed. A tribe is usually so large a group that real kinship between all members is rather unlikely. What matters, however, is the assumption of kinship, mostly constructed by means of a common ancestor in a remote past. Responsible positions are generally held according to rank in mostly patrilinear pedigrees; the tribal élite is formed by elders of family and clan groupings. In a civic society cleavages formed by kinship are of secondary rank. The whole community is considered to be a single body. The public organs are the paramount authority for all citizens who tend to be, in legal terms, equal. Functional criteria (technical eligibility in the first instance) are decisive for the recruitment of officials and élite members.

It is unnecessary to stress that tribal and civic societies, in the antisepic purity of ideal types, are fictional. Even to become President of the United States sometimes can be a matter of kinship. And of course both the Roman Republic and the Roman Empire offer excellent examples of civic and tribal elements intermingling. Nevertheless, the United States and Rome are indisputably civic in

their character. There are, however, a number of societies in the Near East, in which tribal and civic elements were, and sometimes still are, so closely inter-linked that a third ideal type is required. I will examine two of them, Palmyra and Hatra.

In a recent and very learned article, Maurice Sartre argued that Palmyra was entirely a "cité grecque", a *polis*, the civic society par excellence.¹ Its Greekness, according to Sartre, appeared mainly in its institutions, in its bodies and officials and in their respective titles, in its relationship with the provincial authorities and, above all, in its system of values, its "valeurs civiques" so characteristic of a Greek city. It cannot be denied that Sartre correctly reports the information given by the epigraphic sources. As a matter of fact, the inscriptions reveal the existence of *grammateis*², *agoranomoi*³ and *stratego*⁴, they indicate that the Palmyrenes possessed a *gymnasium*⁵, and they give evidence that the urban élite, like their counterparts in any Greek city, boasted of euergetism.⁶

The conclusion Sartre draws from this is plain: "L'installation d'un cadre institutionnel gréco-romain est un fait indéniable à Palmyre."⁷ To take the usage of the mere nomenclature of Greek public officials by the Palmyrenes as an argument for Palmyra being a Greek *polis*, however, goes much too far. First, even in the Greek world proper terms like *grammateus* or *agoranomos* had an immense variety of significations. There was no common concept of what a *grammateus* had to be or to do. As a matter of fact, in classical Athens, as in Palmyra, there were *grammateis tes boules kai demou*.⁸ And *agoranomoi* in most of the Roman colonies of the Greek East were equivalent to the *aediles* in the Latin West. But the evidence merely shows that in Palmyra *bouleutai*, *grammateis* and *agoranomoi* were in office; we have no clear idea what exactly they were in charge of. Hence the adoption of an institutional terminology does not necessarily imply the adoption of an entire institutional framework.

¹ Sartre 1996.

² See, for example, the Greek preamble of the famous bilingual Tax Law (1,3): 'Αλεξάνδρου 'Αλεξάνδρου τοῦ Φιλοπάτρος γραμματέως βουλῆς καὶ δήμου. For a German translation, see Brodersen 1987. Further information is provided by Dessau 1884; Seyrig 1941; Matthews 1984; Teixidor 1983. The term occurs also in Palmyrene transcription: *grmt*'.

³ Cantineau *Inv.* 10,85: ἀγορανομήσαντα.

⁴ Sartre 1996, 391: "Il faudrait peut-être faire une place aux responsables militaires, chargés de diriger la milice de Palmyra, les *stratèges*, qui pourraient aussi être des magistrats." Sartre's distinction between two different officials, one military, one civilian, bearing the title *strategos*, is hardly convincing. Much more likely, the Palmyrene *stratego*i fulfilled both duties, military as well as civilian. The office thus was not identical to the *stratego*i, corresponding to the Latin *duumviri*, of most other cities of the Greek East. It was a particularly Palmyrene one, but with Greek nomenclature. Millar 1993, 327; Jones 1940, 163–166.

⁵ Cantineau *Inv.* 10,102: A Palmyrene official is called WGMNSYRKS (*gymnasiarchos*), thus implying the existence of a corresponding institution.

⁶ Sufficiently testified to by the numerous honorific inscriptions celebrating individual acts of *euergetia*.

⁷ Sartre 1996, 396.

⁸ For Athens, Arist. *Athen. pol.* 54,4.

Another far-reaching question needs to be addressed: the character of the tribes and the *phylai*, by which the city was divided and structured. Again, Sartre equates a Palmyrene institution not only in name, but also in substance with a Greek one. He takes for granted that the *phylai* of Palmyra were “tribus civiques”, i. e. intentionally and artificially created subdivisions of the *polis*’ civic body, the *dēmos*.⁹ But at least two of these tribes, the Bene Mattabol and the Bene Komara, came into being as early as the 1st c. BCE, when Palmyra was hardly any more than a temporary settlement site of semi-nomadic populations.¹⁰ Sartre’s explanation, that the Romans’ overlordship in Palmyra imposed the *polis* structure and selected some of the existing tribes to become the *tēs poleōs tesseres phylai* forming the *dēmos* of Palmyra, is far from convincing.¹¹

It is not even clear what the exact relationship between the desert city and its imperial neighbour in the West was. A reconstruction by Henri Seyrig, shared by most French scholars dealing with Palmyra, gives five stages of development: Palmyra was, firstly, an independent city state between the Roman and Parthian Empires; secondly, it became, presumably under Tiberius, “ville tributaire” of the Roman Empire; thirdly, on the occasion of Hadrian’s visit in the 130s it was exempted from tribute; fourthly, it became a *colonia civium Romanorum*; and, fifthly, it was a “principauté vassale” of the Roman Empire during the third century CE crisis.¹² This schedule is, though suggestive, highly speculative. Apart from Palmyra’s promotion to colonial status under Caracalla,¹³ none of the stages proposed by Seyrig can be traced in the evidence.

The pattern of a smooth provincialisation of Palmyra, moreover, presupposes a sharp separation between Roman and non-Roman territory in the Near East. It seems to me much more likely that the power exercised by Rome (and by the Parthians as well) in the Syro-Mesopotamian steppe decreased gradually with the increase of distance. In other words, the area between the Syro-Phoenician coastal strip and Babylonia was a frontier par excellence, a twilight zone with amorphous patterns of territory and power. The question is therefore not: was Palmyra a city belonging to the Roman Empire, but rather: how far did Roman influence and control reach in Palmyra? To what degree did and could Rome influence the social structure and cultural orientation of the Palmyrenes? And what was the contribution of the Palmyrenes themselves?

Sartre’s *polis* paradigm, as well as Seyrig’s modelling of Palmyra’s provincialisation, are far too simplistic and functionalistic to shape a process of accul-

⁹ Sartre 1994, 286 f. He relies on an influential article by Schlumberger 1971, 121–133, which tries to identify the four tribes of Palmyra mentioned in a Greek inscription from the sanctuary of Baalshamin in the northern part of the city. See Dunand 1971, No. 48, 6.

¹⁰ Bene Komara is attested by Cantineau *Inv.* 11,84 (probably not 83 CE, but 17 BCE); Bene Mattabol for the first time by Cantineau *Inv.* 8,56 (9 CE).

¹¹ Sartre 1996, 387: “Rome a donc choisi, dans l’ensemble des groupes tribaux, quatre groupes privilégiés, considérés comme constitutifs de la cité nouvelle.”

¹² Seyrig 1941, 170–172. The same development is assumed by Will 1992, 40, and Starcky and Gawlikowski 1985, 33–79. More reserved, however, Teixidor 1984, 12–14. See now for our secure knowledge Hartmann 2001, 45–64.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 59. Ulp. *de cens.* 1, Dig. 50,15,1,4–5; Cantineau *Inv.* 10,115, palmyr. 2.

turation in all its ambiguity and complexity. It is certain that the Palmyrenes were involved in such a process or rather, to quote the title of our conference, engaged in cultural “borrowings” in the Greco-Roman world. But what resulted from this was not, as claimed by Sartre, a true copy of a Hellenic *polis* or a Roman *civitas*. Palmyra’s explosive dynamism in the 3rd century CE was, as will be shown, due to a social development *sui generis*.

Since the pivotal issue seems to be the *phylai*, I will start my considerations here. Unlike Sartre and many of the French school, I do believe that the tribal structure revealed by numerous inscriptions was by no means artificial, but rather a reflex of vital structural patterns of Palmyrene society. The Palmyrene *phylai*, instead of being mere sub-organisations of the civic body, were expressions of kinship or, what is much the same, supposed kinship. That Palmyra, though highly urbanised, hosted a society which was and continued to be tribal in character is indicated by a number of sources, though the tribal organisation changed in many details.¹⁴

Among the most striking ones is the urban layout of the city itself. The city’s main axis, the colonnaded street running from the sanctuary of Bel to the camp of Diocletian, is obviously a new architectural feature cut into the existing town plan.¹⁵ It provided an apparent unity to a city which nevertheless could hardly disguise its origin from various settlement nuclei, all of them located around the sites of sanctuaries. One of these nuclei could be traced in the neighbourhood of the temple of Baalshamin to the north of the city, another, the so-called “ville hellénistique” in the vicinity of the sanctuary of Arsu, to the south of the *agora*. A third nucleus from which the settlement spread, was formed by the junction of the roads to Soura, Dura Europos and Emesa on the territory of the later camp of Diocletian, close to the location of the sanctuary of Allat.¹⁶ It is hardly accidental that each of these temples is connected in the epigraphic evidence with a particular tribal group: the sanctuaries of Allat and Baalshamin with the Bene Ma’ziyan, attested well before the coming of Rome, and that of Arsu with the Bene Mattabol.¹⁷ A fourth sanctuary with apparent links to a tribal group, the temple of Atargatis associated with the Bene Mita, has not yet been located.¹⁸

The evidence suggests that the urbanisation process through which Palmyra developed originated from different parts of the city and involved several groups which we usually refer to as tribes. Palmyra’s topography preserved the memory of its earlier state by maintaining the irregular pattern. The connections between tribal groups and sanctuaries, dating from the very beginning of the urbanisation process, survived even Palmyra’s elevation to colonial status. It is therefore rather unlikely that the subdivision of the Palmyrene urban society into the famous four tribes, even if called *phylai* in Greek (translated to Palmyrene as *phd*

¹⁴Cf. now, for a discussion of the evidence in more depth, Yon 2002, 57–98.

¹⁵Most recently Baranski 1995, 37–46. See also the forthcoming PhD thesis (Cologne) by M. Tabaczek.

¹⁶For the urban development, see Will 1983, 76 f.; Will 1992, 122–124.

¹⁷Cf. now Kaizer 2002, 64–65; Dirven 1999, 78.

¹⁸Kaizer 2002, 153–154.

– ‘members’), was due to Roman intervention. Given, however, that the Palmyrene *phylai* did not resemble their Hellenistic counterparts in Rome’s Greek provinces, their precise shape and character is still an open question.

The concept of Palmyra as a “Greek city” owes much to the supposition outlined above, that “tribal” and “civic” institutions cannot coexist in one society. This is, at least apart from the Greek world, true to a certain extent. Wherever the civic structure of a *polis* became predominant, it suppressed or transformed pre-urban elements of kinship. The assumption, however, that tribal and civic structures are mutually exclusive is plainly wrong when urban societies of ancient Mesopotamia and pre-Hellenistic Syria are taken into consideration. These societies preserved a potent kinship component, either real or fictional, even after central institutions such as hereditary kingship had appeared and become fully developed. Moreover, institutions which classicists would consider “civic” were, in many oriental cities, rather “tribal”. There is plenty of evidence of council-like bodies and people’s assemblies, which consisted of tribal elders and kinship group delegates.¹⁹

Along with the first misleading assumption comes a second one, postulating that sedentary populations in towns and villages on the one hand and nomads on the other are inevitably antagonistic. Conflict between rural or urban societies and nomads stretches back indeed as long as the history of agriculture. Town dwellers usually perceived the territorial sphere of nomads as being hostile, inhabited by threatening demons and evil spirits, a “country of the thirst” to be avoided whenever possible. In reality, however, co-operation among urban, rural and nomadic populations was rather the rule than the exception. The Bronze Age city of Mari, situated in the arid, virtually unfertile valley of the Middle Euphrates, depended for its subsistence entirely on the collaboration of the surrounding pastoral tribes. In years of drought, nomads provided livestock, thus balancing out crop shortfalls. Furthermore, they linked the city to adjacent regions and thus contributed much to its long-distance trade. Nomadic and semi-nomadic pastoralists and settled populations depended on each other economically and socially. Nomads, incorporated in the bureaucratic structure of the city, became civic officials; conversely, the settled populations shared the tribal organisation with their nomadic kinsmen, whether real or fictional. The king was head of the state bureaucracy and a tribal confederation’s paramount chief at the same time.²⁰ M. B. Rowton felicitously called this specific pattern “dimorphic”. Mari and its hinterland were the first dimorphic society we know, providing the paradigm for many to come in an area stretching from the Levant to present-day Afghanistan.²¹

¹⁹ On Mesopotamia Van de Mieroop 1997, *passim*; Postgate 1992, 81, 92. For Syria, Phoenicia, and Israel, Liverani 1988, 211; Pettinato, 1994, 149; Sommer 2000, 178 f.; Gottwald ²1981, 368–369, Jacobsen 1943.

²⁰ Kupper 1957; Kupper 1967; Luke 1965; Klengel 1972, 110–125; Matthews 1978. For pre-Hellenistic Tadmor see now, though hardly convincing, Scharrer 2002. There is a vast literature on the co-existence of pastoralist/nomadic and sedentary populations in Roman North Africa as well, e. g. Shaw 1978; Shaw 1982; Leveau 1988.

²¹ Rowton 1973; Rowton 1974; Rowton 1976, 17–31. For the interrelation between nomadic and non-nomadic populations, Khazanov 1983 is still fundamental.

Historically much closer to Palmyra than Mari is Hatra, situated in the eastern Jezirah about 60 km north-west of ancient Assur. The city, still small and rather insignificant when Trajan pitched into what was then Parthian Mesopotamia, immediately afterwards underwent an enormous boom, accompanied by extraordinary building activity. Within less than a century seven individual sanctuaries were erected in the three courts of the city's vast central temple complex, the Bait Alaha. At about the same time, the surrounding dwelling area of the almost exactly circular city expanded decisively, requiring the construction of new enlarged fortifications. By the time Hatra was again besieged by Roman legions under the command of Septimius Severus during his Parthian wars, it was a flourishing city, bursting with ceremonial offerings brought to its sanctuaries by numerous pilgrims.²²

In the end, however, even Hatra's famous fortifications proved insufficient when Ardashir's Sasanian Empire intensified its efforts to regain formerly Achaemenid territories by expanding westward. Ardashir's troops in 240 CE suddenly terminated the prosperous development of the city which had already hosted a Roman garrison for some ten years. The site was never resettled. In the final years of Hatra's existence, two brothers, Elkūd and Yahbarmarēn, erected a statue of the city's ruling monarch, Sanatrūq II., in the so-called Shrine XI. The shrine is one of 13 small-sized sanctuaries in the dwelling area discovered so far. All of them are erected in the style of a Babylonian "Breitraumtempel": two rooms of different size arranged in the shape of a "T". The two brothers added an inscription to the statue, examined in detail first by K. Dijkstra, worth quoting in its entirety²³:

"Statue of the King Sanatrūq, the victorious, whose fortune is with the gods, the son of Abdsamiya, erected for him on the day of the birth of his fortune, since they enjoy it: Yahbarmarēn and Elkūd, the sons of Šamašbarek, the son of Elkūd, the son of Šamašbarek, the son of Elkūd. And they – Yahbarmarēn and Elkūd and their sons and the progeny of those, who are inside and outside²⁴ – solemnly swear by our lord, the eagle, and by his reign and by the fortune of Arab and by the *sēmeia* of Maškane and by the fortune of king Sanatrūq and by his progeny and their sons, that no-one of their kin, belonging to it, will ever seize by violence Ma'ana', the son of king Sanatrūq. May they be remembered in Hatra and in Arab forever."

Interpretation of the inscription poses a number of difficulties. First, there is the surprising fact that two Hatrenes swear an oath that neither they themselves nor their kinsmen will do any harm to their own king's son. Loyalty does not appear to be taken for granted. Secondly, it is a remarkable feature that Yahbarmarēn's and Elkūd's fellow clansmen – for "their sons and the progeny of

²²For the architectural history of Hatra see Hauser 2000, 187–201; Hauser 1998, 493–528; Sommer 2003. Cass. Dio, 76,12,2 refers to Hatra's wealth in money and religious offerings, when Severus came, and (ibid. 68,31,1) to its being "neither large nor significant" in the time of Trajan.

²³Vattioni 1981, No. 79.

²⁴Dijkstra 1990, 81–98, translates, hardly aptly, "[...] and whoever belongs to them with their possessions outside and inside [...]". Dijkstras' important article, however, is the first to interpret Vattioni 1981, No. 79 in the context of dimorphic society.

those” certainly refers to a kingroup – are divided into “inside” and “outside”, which undoubtedly refers to the city of Hatra itself. The apparent importance of the distinction hints that it is more than simply their location that divides them. The context rather suggests that we are dealing with two separate groups with different ways of life, each, however, part of the same clan, one living within the city walls, one outside. The clan’s in-branch thus probably consisted of urban dwellers, its out-branch of either peasants or nomads or both.

This view is supported by two other inscriptions reporting a decision by the assembly of the people.²⁵ The almost identical texts distinguish several groups forming the assembly: the “old” and the “small” on the one hand, the “Hatrenes” and the “Arabs” on the other. Both levels of distinction are fairly clear: “old” and “small” are not categories of age, but of social rank; “Hatrenes” vs. “Arabs” distinguishes the city’s inhabitants from the surrounding nomads.²⁶ The people’s assembly was thus composed of both nomads and urban dwellers. Like Yahbarmarēn’s and Elkūd’s clan, it had its out-branch and its in-branch. The distinction between tribal elders and common tribesmen is a clear marker that the assembly was subdivided into kinship groupings. Though in a functional sense a “civic” institution, empowered to decree laws for the Hatrene commonwealth, in its composition it maintained a decisively “tribal” character.

The inscription of Yahbarmarēn and Elkūd provides an even deeper insight into the interactions between “tribe” and “state”, between sedentary population and nomads. The place where the two brothers put up their dedication, Shrine XI, like others of these secondary sanctuaries, forms the nucleus of a neighbourhood whose enclosed character can still be traced in the city plan. Hatra’s urban layout follows the typical pattern of the oriental city, with dead ends, serpentine lanes, and markedly separated and self-contained quarters. The statue was not by any means the only dedication made by Yahbarmarēn’s and Elkūd’s clan in this shrine, thus making it clear that this was the kin group’s own sanctuary in town. It is probable that the shrines worked as links and common cultic centres for both branches of the clan: one resident in the adjacent neighbourhood, the other being nomadic pastoralists.

After all, the reference to certain deities given in the inscription could indicate that they maintained a special relationship with the clan. We do not know whether Marēn (“our lord the eagle”) was worshipped in Shrine XI, and we have no precise idea what Maškane, referred to in only one other inscription (H. 50, 3) in a rather enigmatic context, might be.²⁷ Maškane might well denote one of Hatra’s kingroups, a tribe or clan, Marēn its divine patron, the *sēmeia* its standard, Shrine XI its cultic centre. Given the lack of hard evidence, this is sheer

²⁵ Vattioni 1981, No. 336, No. 343.

²⁶ The significance of “arab” and related words is a much-discussed topic. The most common meaning refers not to an ethnic identity, but rather to a nomadic way of life. Cf. Gawlikowski 1995, 85; Kaizer 2002, 57; I. Toral-Niehoff 2001, 117. See also Millar, this volume.

²⁷ Cf. Vattioni 1981, No. 50. The graffito was found in Shrine No. III and is a dedication to the memory of a certain ‘*bd’dn*. Either Marēn or Barmarēn, both deities of the divine triad of Hatra, is referred to as “god of Maškane”.

speculation; but if our presumption is right, it matches well with the image of a society in which kinship was the pivotal reference point of social identity.

What happened before Yahbarmarēn and Elkūd put up their statue with the inscription? The text itself provides the occasion, since the brothers and their kinsmen swear their oath on a suspiciously concrete issue: a member of the clan must have “seized”, i. e. abducted, Ma’ana’, one of the royal princes. Hence the text deals with a conflict between the supreme central authority, represented by the king and his family, and a particular, though unknown person. The quarrel, therefore, is obviously no symptom of endemic conflict between nomadic tribes and the “state”, but a completely private one. In order to settle the conflict, however, the clan’s supreme authorities are employed. Apparently, there was no direct communication between the king and his subjects, but only a mediated one, with a major role played by family elders and clan chiefs. The erection of the statue was clearly a gesture of atonement.

The inscription reveals the comparatively weak position of the king in the network of clans and tribes forming Hatra’s society. Being hardly more than *primus inter pares*, he relied on consensus among mighty kin leaders. Central authority in dimorphic societies was never really strong, and it had to face powerful kinship institutions surviving the process of urbanisation. The balance between settled and mobile populations was always an extremely precarious one.

Was this true also for Palmyra? Before comparing Palmyra with Hatra, we have to take into account a number of variables, the most important of which is geography. Both cities are situated in arid environments, but of an entirely different character. The site of Hatra lies some 20 km south of the 200 mm *isohyet*. North of this line, towards the Jebel Sinjar (the site of ancient Singara), there is still enough precipitation to allow farming in a sustaining, though modest scale. In the direct surroundings of Hatra, however, cultivation is possible only in some major wadis. An urban society’s survival in the Hatrene could be guaranteed only by enlarging its subsistence basis, combining agriculture, animal husbandry and, if possible, trade. This inevitably involved the pastoralists and thus contributed much to the rise of a dimorphic society.

Conditions were rather different in Palmyra. The city in its oasis could count on steadily productive harvests. The oasis permitted intense irrigation agriculture without any threat of rain shortfall. Moreover, though there has been no major climate change in the last two millennia, the Syrian steppe including the Palmyrene, for different reasons, has undergone massive environmental degradation. Conditions for farming in the area surrounding Palmyra are now definitely much worse than they were in the Roman period. That there really *was* cultivation to a substantial degree in the Palmyrene is attested by the Tax Law, which refers in most of its parts to agricultural products brought into the city and sold on the local market. This poses a question: were there any reasons for the inhabitants of Palmyra to be on good terms with the nomadic pastoralists of the steppe? Was there any material basis for a dimorphic social pattern?

If the answer is yes, it is due to the second variable which comes into play, the importance of trade. That Palmyra’s enormous wealth was fully dependent on

caravans coming and going hardly needs any more evidence than the numerous inscriptions which honoured those in the caravan trade. A key factor for trade were the nomads of the steppe, like those in Mesopotamia, pastoralists, not Bedouin nomads. As in Hatra, trade was an issue on which the intrinsic interests of sedentary and mobile populations could converge. They could, however, also diverge, and therefore we possess much evidence for mighty men, the *synodiarchai*, who were honoured more than once for their assistance to and protection of caravans against predatory nomads.²⁸

These *synodiarchai* were by no means merchants themselves. They were honoured by merchants, which makes a big difference, and they surely held an elevated social rank, much higher than that of the merchants, of whom none is known by name. From the time of Hadrian onwards, many of the *synodiarchai* bear Roman names and thus enjoyed the prestige of Roman citizenship. Most of the honorific inscriptions share one feature: instead of being erected by order of the people's assembly, they are put up by a specific group as a return service for a particular effort, thus forming part of an asymmetrical reciprocal relationship. It is tempting to call this relationship patronage, with the honoured being patrons, the honouring clients. Only in some extraordinary cases did *dēmos* and *boulē* confer honours upon a *synodiarchēs*.²⁹

Hence not even the custom of erecting honorific inscriptions matches perfectly with the institutional framework of a Greek *polis*. The semantics are entirely different. The *synodiarchai* have little, if anything, to do with members of the Greek cities' ruling classes offering *leitourgiai* to, and being rewarded with inscriptions by the public. Their main contribution undoubtedly was to organise and fund the Palmyrene long distance trade, to establish and maintain good relationships between Palmyra and the nomads, and to enable the caravans to cross the desert, if necessary by means of war. The *synodiarchai* were men with outstanding diplomatic and military capabilities, but the simplest explanation for their evident success is that they were tribesmen themselves, related by kinship ties to nomads and city dwellers at the same time.

The model of Palmyrene society I would suggest, therefore, differs sharply from the *polis* paradigm put forward by Sartre. Though "civic" elements at first sight seem to prevail in the evidence, the society's basic pattern was kinship. On top of the social pyramid we find a group of wealthy patrons who organised and controlled the long distance trade, the city's main source of wealth. At the same time they formed intermediate links between the tribes and the city. Like the tribal-urban élite of Bronze Age Mari, they hold high positions in the city's administrative hierarchy³⁰, many of them also being Roman citizens or even knights and thus integrated in the wider horizon of the imperial élite. On the other hand, they maintained kinship bonds with the nomads, sharing possibly (as in present-day Afghanistan and Iran) their migratory way of life. At least sporadi-

²⁸ For instance Cantineau *Inv.* 10,44; 10,111.

²⁹ See the inscription of 'Ogēlu, the son of Maqqai (Cantineau *Inv.* 10,44).

³⁰ Cf. Cantineau *Inv.* 10,44, P7-8, for the striking example of 'Ogēlu who "completed his political career with glory and excellence" and was, therefore, honoured by the four tribes.

cally the part-time nomads accompanied the caravans on their way eastward.³¹ The caravan inscriptions reveal the merchants' almost total dependence on the *synodiarchai*. The asymmetrical reciprocal relationship between them is likely to be patronage; whether it rests on the basis of kinship or not, however, cannot be decided.

The basically and not merely superficially tribal structure of Palmyra's society is now strikingly confirmed by a thorough study of Palmyra's tombs.³² The tombs' structure with thousands of *loculi*, each containing several burials, in one tomb building clearly indicates the fundamental importance of kin groups, more fictional than real, for every aspect of life, literally from cradle to grave. The structure does not vary with the tomb type, whether "tower", "temple" or "hypogeum". Every tomb building obviously belonged to one clan group, providing enough space for the burial of several hundreds, if not thousands, of individuals. It is impossible that they all belonged to one family; but their sense of a common bond and feeling of solidarity was evidently so strong that they desired to be buried in the same place. No similar tribal coherence, stretching to the hereafter, is known from anywhere else in the classical world.

What was "borrowed" from Greek and Roman civilisations was certainly not the paradigm of the *polis* as a whole. But there were, undeniably, many single institutions of "civic" character adopted from the *polis*. To these belonged the entire nomenclature of public officials. Since we are unaware of their specific duties and functions, we can hardly decide whether it was only the terminology which was 'borrowed'. We definitely cannot exclude that certain "civic" institutions existed alongside the basically "tribal" structure of Palmyrene society. That the erection of honorific inscriptions, though utterly Greek in style, possessed a different meaning for the Palmyrenes has been pointed out above. The institutional framework of Palmyra thus reflects the impression of its art and architecture: apparently Greek in its means of expression, at least at first sight, but thoroughly local in its contents. Palmyra was no Greek city at all, it was a city of the Near Eastern steppe frontier with a blinding, ingeniously "borrowed" Greek facade.

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³¹ See the unambiguous testimony of Cantineau *Inv.* 3,21, G3–5: οἱ σὺν αὐτῷ καταλθόντες εἰς Ὀλογοσιὰδα.

³² Recent fieldwork results presented by A. Schmidt-Colinet at a conference in Vienna (April 2003). Cf. the forthcoming volume with the proceedings *Lokale Identitäten in Randgebieten des Römischen Reiches*.

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