Women in Roman Syria: the Cases of Dura-Europos, Palmyra, and Seleucia on the Euphrates
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This thesis investigates the social life of women in three cities in Roman Syria: Dura-Europos, Palmyra, and Seleucia on the Euphrates; in particular, how this social life was influenced by the various cultures within this province. The aim of this study was to investigate female participation in the various spheres of life — funerary, religious, and public — and the circumstances of their involvements, ultimately broadening our knowledge on the lives of women in Roman Syria and thus of Roman Syria in general. Anthropological and sociological studies have shown that by studying women, one increases one’s understanding of a society and of the social groups in which these women acted. Additionally, the quest for cultural influences on the lives of women calls for the use of the hybrid model through which, one can study various processes of cultural exchange. Cultural exchange can be studied by examining values and ideas of societies, but on the ground level, it is especially inscriptions and material culture that have proven to be rather useful. Through their names, appearances, and attributes, women signify the values and cultures embedded in societies, social groups, and families. Therefore an interdisciplinary approach was needed, combining inscriptions with material evidence such as portraits and jewellery.

The Roman province of Syria was one of cultural and political diversity. Different rulers from outside Syria governed this region; among them, the Achaemenids, the Seleucids, and the Romans. However, the province was also characterized by strong local and regional cultures, of which the Palmyrenes are a striking example. It is precisely this cultural landscape that makes Roman Syria the perfect test case for studying the impact of culture on the lives of women. It is for this reason that I chose three cities of diverse geographical and cultural backgrounds.

The first chapter investigates women from Dura-Europos. This city is located on the left bank of the Euphrates and was ruled (respectively) by the Seleucids, the Parthians, and the Romans until it was captured by the Sassanids in 256 CE and abandoned shortly thereafter. Material testifying to the lives of historical women is mainly found in the temples scattered throughout the city. Portraits showing women, accompanied by their families, dressed in colourful garments and adorned with headdresses and jewellery were found on the temple walls and in three cult rooms steps inscribed with females names — all testifying to the active participation of women in the religious life of the city. As it turns out, Durene women were important vehicles for elite families to present themselves in the religious sphere. Even so, both the wording and grammar of the inscriptions indicate that these women acted mainly on their own behalf. Furthermore, from the material excavated in the temples, I concluded that in addition to Greek culture or ‘Greekness’ being an important signifier of social status throughout the city’s history, elite women – more often than men – also displayed their local identity via their names and appearance.

Chapter two deals with women from Palmyra. This city is located near an oasis, halfway between Damascus and the Euphrates and was a trade hub for trade between the East and the West. It flourished in the first three centuries of the Common Era and its urban character was largely Graeco-Roman with its colonnaded streets, theatre, and baths. Greek institutions such as the demos were part of the city’s governance, but its tribal character remained important for the elite families who were linked to them, whether this connection was via a real or perceived ancestry.
Material evidence of historical women is found in various spheres of life, making Palmyra a perfect case study in examining the participation of women in city life. The practice of euergetism is found throughout the Graeco-Roman world and the Palmyrenes also incorporated this custom in the public realm. Benefactions, however, mainly focused on religious benefactions, which was a local adaptation of this Graeco-Roman practice. Women also acted as benefactors or erected honorary statues of their relatives when the responsibility of euergetism and presenting one’s family in the public domain became their responsibility. This was often the case when one’s male relatives were no longer able to do this. The same appears to have been true regarding their participation in the religious life of the city. Here, their involvement is attested by dedicatory altars to a deity invoked as ‘He whose name is blessed forever’. These small altars for the offering of incense were erected on behalf of themselves and their family members. On a few occasions women erected these together with their (male) relatives, but many altars in my corpus were erected by women themselves.

Evidence of female participation was also found in the funerary realm. So-called foundation inscriptions and cession texts testify that some Palmyrene women were able to manage funerary property as buyers and sellers. The circumstances of these transactions appear to have been similar to those regarding the public and religious realm: women acted as representatives of their families. Since status was communicated via the patrilineal line, it is not surprising that being ‘the daughter of’ a particular male was an important message conveyed by the funerary sculptures as well. Female portraiture and the accompanying epitaphs communicated family lineage (through the patrilineal line), wealth, and locality. All in all, elite Palmyrene women were indispensable messengers for their families and their participation in the three spheres of life indicate that they were fully integrated into their families’ strategies.

The third chapter deals with Seleucia on the Euphrates, a town in present-day southern Turkey. Like Dura-Europos, it was founded by the Seleucids, but it was especially Roman culture that had an impact on the city. For nearly 200 years, a Roman legion was stationed here, due to its strategic location. Most material comes from the domestic and funerary realms, and it is especially this within this latter sphere that evidence regarding historical women has been excavated. At Seleucia, the burial tombs were relatively small and designed to serve small families. Generally speaking, they consisted of burial chambers with the actual graves and front rooms, which had walls decorated with portrait reliefs or portrait statues and inscriptions. It has been argued that these front rooms were used to celebrate banquets on behalf of the deceased.

The iconography on the reliefs showed that Seleucia was a rather hybrid culture. For instance, elements such as the eagle and the wool basket are also found on funerary monuments elsewhere in the Graeco-Roman world, but the execution of these elements as the only or main imagery on a relief was, in fact, rather local. Interestingly, the women of Seleucia appeared to have a wide range of variety in dress styles. Where women of Dura-Europos and Palmyra usually conform to a single dress, the funerary portraits show that this was not the case for women in Seleucia. While this freedom in dress styles is not fully understood, it implies that women (or their families) had a choice. Women could portray their worldliness through Roman dress; conversely, they could convey local identity and wealth when dressed in local garments. Based on the funerary monuments, Seleucia can truly be considered a hybrid city.

This research has demonstrated that women were important signifiers of the social and cultural identities of their families. Moreover, their participation in city life was especially influenced by locality. Dura-Europos was a city with strong local tendencies and here women
had a relatively high level of independence that appears to have transcended the lives of women in Palmyra and Seleucia – and even the lives of women in the Latin West or Greek East. For Seleucia on the Euphrates, perhaps the city with the strongest Graeco-Roman culture, women did have a wide range of choices regarding dress styles; however, we have no information on whether this freedom carried over into other realms of life. Palmyra was also a city with Graeco-Roman tendencies, but these tendencies were combined with a similarly strong local character. Here, women participated in the various spheres of life and were clearly indispensable in advertising their family’s interests, but often only after the men were unable to do so. To fully comprehend the social lives of the (elite) families in Roman Syria, one needs further study into the mechanisms behind cultural exchange and how women were using or used as cultural signifiers in this province. Especially in these times of cultural destruction, one can only hope that the importance of this region and its material culture is recognized by those in power.