

# Serial Production or Individual Orders? Palmyrene Inscriptions on Artefacts from the 1<sup>st</sup> to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Centuries AD

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The issue of serial production at Palmyra may be investigated from the viewpoint of inscriptions on artefacts produced in series. The main question I address is what the epigraphs tell us about the artefacts, be they examples of individual orders or items that were produced in series, as well as their process of production. My analysis focuses on the types of text written on different types of artefacts. The Palmyrene corpus comprises about three thousand inscriptions. The attested text-types include funerary epitaphs, honourific inscriptions, and religious dedications. They are written on architectural and cultic items: mainly on column-brackets, altars, and bas-reliefs.<sup>1</sup> Other significant examples of inscribed, mass-produced items are oil-lamps and *tesserae*. The last term indicates small clay (or glass) tokens with brief inscriptions and visual elements, which were distributed to guests attending banquets called *marzeah* in Aramaic. This well-known Semitic institution is amply documented at Palmyra. Tesseræ and oil-lamps are good examples of widespread cheap goods, easily reproduced by means of moulds.<sup>2</sup>

My discussion focuses on the epigraphs in their context, with special attention given to formulaic texts attested in hundreds of specimens. Other examples of Palmyrene large-scale production are inscribed column brackets where statues were placed, as well as small incense altars. About three hundred examples of this type of third-century altars are known, and I have recently discussed some of the peculiarities in the formulation of their inscriptions.<sup>3</sup> I believe they are a good example of the process of selection and purchase of items: dedicants went to local workshops and chose the artefacts they could afford and that met their needs, in terms of decoration, shape and price. There are examples of different writing skills and variations in the structure of dedications. Likewise, funerary reliefs were ordered, or chosen among available semi-finished artefacts at local workshops. The brief epitaphs were added later, or completed, in some cases when the relief was *in situ*. Sometimes it is also possible to observe different writing styles and handwritings on a relief.<sup>4</sup> Longer text-types offer the opportunity to discuss further the issue of individual orders. It is impossible, however, to deepen the analysis of the process of production: there are no extant written documents mentioning the exploitation of quarries, orders, payment, nor records of the work of craftsmen and workshops. Administrative documents were written on perishable writing materials, and have not survived. Palmyrene inscriptions do not allow us to reconstruct the process of making and inscribing the artefacts. Thus, the key-question regarding who wrote the inscriptions and how orders and production were carried out cannot be answered. The epigraphs and the artefacts they accompanied are analysed as a whole, in order to

evaluate the degree of individualisation of formulaic texts in the context of the serial production of given artefacts.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> For edition, Hillers – Cussini 1996; al-Asʿad et al. 2012; Yon 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Tesserae: Ingholt et al. 1955 (cf. Hillers – Cussini 1995, mainly PAT 2012–2623); Schmidt-Colinet – al-Asʿad 2005. Oil-lamps: Fellmann 1975, 13–59; Higuchi – Izumi 1994, 91–100 pl. 58–62.

<sup>3</sup> Cussini 2019.

<sup>4</sup> Cussini 2022.

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