NOTICE OF GENERAL MEETING

The first General Meeting of the Society for 1983 will be held in the Museum Education Building, North Terrace, Adelaide at

8.00PM MONDAY, 28 MARCH, 1982

AGENDA

1. Apologies.

2. Minutes of Previous General Meeting.
   Minutes of the previous General Meeting, held Monday, 25 October, 1982 to be confirmed. A copy of these minutes is attached.

3. New Members.
   The following new members were elected to the Society,
   John Albert LIENERT
   Kate FORREST
   Catherine Therese CLARKE
   Geoffrey Dale ASLIN

4. Papers and Journals.
   Papers and Journals from other Societies and Organizations will be tabled at the meeting.

5. Business.

6. Speaker.
   ADRIAN MARRIE, will give an address to the Society entitled:

   THE IMPLICATIONS OF WESTERN ART TRADITIONS
   FOR ABORIGINAL PEOPLE

7. Supper.

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PETRA AND PALMYRA

Address given to the General Meeting of the Anthropological Society on Monday, 26 July, 1982 by

Dr. F.B. SEAR

I have chosen these two oasis towns as the subject of this paper because each in turn acquired its wealth and power from the caravan routes which linked the Graeco-Roman world with the Orient. Petra was in its heyday during the 1st Century BC and the 1st Century AD, but when Trajan's conquests shifted the Roman frontier eastwards (106 AD) Petra lost its key position on the trade routes between east and west. Its place was taken by Palmyra more remotely sited in the Syrian desert, between the Roman cities of the Levantine coast and the vast Parthian Empire across the Euphrates. Palmyra developed into a city of unimaginable splendor during the 2nd Century AD and at one point in the 3rd Century, led by its semi-oriental Queen, Zenobia, overran much of Rome's eastern Empire and challenged the armies of Rome itself.

The site of Petra is awe-inspiring. It is reached through a crack in the rock which opens into a canyon, and the city itself is built on a broad plain walled in by the towering mountains of Edom. To understand the importance of Petra's position a little should be said about the geography of the region (see Figure 1). Petra is situated on the Rift valley which runs from the Gulf of Aqaba through the Dead Sea to the Bekka valley of Lebanon. There were fresh water springs along the eastern side of the Rift mountains, and this route was followed by the caravans. The road to Damascus still bears the name of King's Highway. A glance at the map will show that Petra is situated at the south end of this highway and that the caravan routes across the Arabian peninsula all meet at that point. Not only could Petra supply abundant water for the thirsty camels and their drivers after the long trek across the desert, but also provided an easy passage through the mountains by means of the Wadi Mousa. Without this crack in the rock the caravans would have been confronted by the daunting mountains of Edom which sweep up to a height of 5,000 feet from the low-lying valley of the Euphrates.

In early times the site was occupied by the Edomites. 'Edom' means 'red', and the name probably derived from the rock which was rich in copper and heavily mined in antiquity. The Bible tells us how the people of Edom were cruelly enslaved by the Israelites and only finally became free when Nebuchadnezzar razed Jerusalem to the ground in 587 BC. Slowly the Edomites left their mountain stronghold and moved down into the plains of Palestine. As they departed their place was taken by the Nabataeans, a nomadic desert people who gradually began to develop their own traditions during the 3rd Century BC.

The Nabataeans were an Aramaic-speaking people ruled by a long line of kings which continued unbroken until the Romans annexed the area. They worshipped two main deities, Dusares, who was represented in their temples by a block of stone, and Al Uzza or Allat, a local fertility goddess. They were a gifted, artistic people, as can be seen in their pottery. It is porcelain-thin and delicately painted with formalized leaf patterns on a brown ground. It was obviously produced in large quantities to judge by the number of sherds of it which are scattered about the site.

However the most conspicuous artistic products of the Nabataeans are the huge tombs cut into the pinkish-brown rock which line the sides of the gorges. They leave an indelible impression upon the visitor. The earliest tombs were influenced by Assyrian monuments with their crowfoot gables, but during the reign of Aretas III (84-56 BC) when the Nabataeans enjoyed their greatest prosperity and their territories stretched as far as Damascus, Greek influence was at its height and can be seen in such powerful facades as that of the Khasne built opposite the mouth of the Siq gorge. The even larger Deir, built a century later, shows how skilfully the Nabataeans assimilated Hellenistic influence into their own native architectural traditions.
Map 1 Trade routes of the ancient Middle East.
The style of these Greek influenced tombs has sometimes been termed 'Baroque' (Lyttleton, Baroque Architecture in Classical Antiquity, London, 1974) and the broken pediments of the Khasne and the Deir do call to mind Baroque monuments of the 17th Century. Indeed some of the earliest visitors to Petra commented upon this fact, but somewhat disparagingly. For example Mr. Banks, who accompanied the expedition of Irby and Mangles in 1818 as their architect, wrote of the architecture of the tombs: "It is loaded with ornaments in the Roman manner, but in a bad taste....It has more the air of a fantastical scene in a theatre than an architectural work in stone; and for unnerving richness and littleness of conception might have been the work of Borromini himself, whose style it exactly resembles, and carried to the extreme."

Irby and Mangles were not the first Europeans to visit Petra, although its discovery was still a recent event at the time. The credit for its discovery goes to the intrepid explorer, John Burkhardt. Burkhardt was the son of a Swiss colonel and was educated in Germany. In 1806 he went to London and met Sir Joseph Banks who offered him a post as an explorer for the Association for Promoting the Discovery of the Interior Parts of Africa. After learning Arabic Burkhardt joined a caravan to Aleppo, disguised as a Hindu-speaking Moslem. Whenever his identity was challenged and he was called upon to prove he was from India by speaking the language he broke into his native Swiss German which triumphantly convinced the suspicious. His knowledge of Arabic was however excellent and he was able to discourse learnedly upon the Koran. In 1810 he visited Palmyra and Baalbeck, and later Amman. During his travels he began to hear stories about a mysterious city in the mountains of Edom to the south, and he longed to visit it. However it was difficult to take a journey to such a remote, little-known place without good reason. Otherwise he would have been regarded as a spy and shown scant mercy. He knew however that the Tomb of Aaron was nearby and made up a story that he had vowed to sacrifice a goat there. He made his way here with a guide and his companions and allying their suspicions made his way through the Siq gorge. What a sight must have met his eyes at the end when he, the first European, glimpsed the 130 ft. high facade of the Khasne through a slit in the rock! The sight is still a powerfully moving one as gradually with every step forward the slit widens, until the whole of that gigantic facade is revealed - in the morning bathed in brilliant white light, at midday a warm golden colour, and in the late afternoon an eerily pinkish red. Who could resist walking up to it and looking inside? Burkhardt dug and even made sketches of it under his thick robes, knowing that if he was caught it was certain death for him. In those days the tombs were thought to be the works of the magician Pharaoh and no good Muslim would go near them. The large rock-cut urn on top of the Khasne was thought to be full of Pharaoh's gold. Hence the many bullet marks which have grazed it, fired by tribesmen hoping to break it open. News of Burkhardt's great discovery slowly filtered into Europe, but meanwhile the great explorer had moved on, to be the first Christian to enter Mecca which he did, in disguise, in 1814. Sadly he died of dysentery in 1817 and was buried in Cairo.

Although Petra is now a well-known and well-published site the magic of its atmosphere never fails to entrance. It is sometimes difficult to express one's feelings about this extraordinary place, sometimes one has to resort to metaphor. Edward Lear's cook could only think of food: "Oh signore, we have come into a world where everything is made of chocolate, ham, curry-powder and salmon."

Dean Burgon was so inspired by accounts of this mysterious city that he wrote his famous poem about it before he had even visited Petra:

It seems no work of Man's creative hand,
By labor wrought as wavering fancy planned;
But from the rock as if by magic grown,
Eternal, silent, beautiful, alone!
Not virgin-white like that old Doric shrine,
Where erst Athena held her rites divine;
Not saintly-grey, like many a minster fane,
That crowns the hill and consecrates the plane;
But rose-red as if the blush of dawn
That first beheld them were not yet withdrawn;
The hues of youth upon a brow of woe,
Which Man deemed old’ two thousand years ago,
Match me such a marvel save in Eastern clime,
A rose-red city half as old as Time.

When he finally saw Petra he admitted there was nothing rose-red about it, although the rock does take on a number of reddish and ochre hues depending upon the time of day. This is perhaps because each fine stratification of the rock is a different reddish or yellowish colour and does in fact possess all the colours that Edward Lear's cook so graphically described. It is a charcutier's gingerbread house, a place so exotic that words alone do not suffice to describe it. Alone of the many classical sites I have visited the images of Petra's rare beauty do not fade.

Palmyra is the Biblical Tadmor. Both words mean 'date palm', an apt name in view of its position as a huge oasis in the middle of the Syrian desert. For a long time it was part of the Seleucid Empire and when the latter began to break up in the 1st Century BC two great powers rushed to fill the vacuum, Rome in the west and Parthia in the east. After Pompey annexed Syria in 64 BC Tadmor found herself on neutral ground between the two empires and this was the source of her prosperity. The Romans wanted eastern luxury goods and the Parthians wanted Roman manufactured goods. Tadmor was an ideal place for exchange trans-shipment. Tadmor almost lost this privileged position when Mark Anthony raided the town in 41 BC. However he arrived to find that the people had simply packed up their belongings and retreated across the Euphrates, thus demonstrating their essentially nomadic nature and their instinctive leanings towards Parthia.

However by about 30 AD the name Palmyra starts to appear and it seems that by this time the Romans had succeeded in taking over. The big temple of Bel dates to this period and the Romans probably contributed to its cost (see Figure 2). The temple is large (55 x 30 metres) and extremely well preserved. Its ground-plan is clearly related to the Temple of Artemis at Magnesia, built by the celebrated Hellenistic architect, Hermogenes, whose work had such an influence upon Vitruvius. The unusual features are the main door set in front of the lateral columns in the Egyptian manner and giving access to a cella broader than it is long, a reversal of normal Hellenistic practice. Also typical of the region are the Persian crowfoot gables over the cornice.

Palmyra continued to prosper as a centre of trade between Rome and Parthia until Trajan's conquest of the East and capture of the Parthian capital, Ctesiphon. For a moment it looked as if the Parthian trade would stop, but fortunately Trajan's successor, Hadrian, relinquished the territories beyond the Tigris and Euphrates and Palmyra became the middleman once more. When Hadrian visited Palmyra in 129 AD he was received tumultuously. During the late 2nd Century and for most of the 3rd the city went from strength to strength. It was during this period that the massive colonnades were built along the main street of Palmyra. A glance at the plan will show how superbly laid out it is. The street changed direction twice. The first change of direction was masked by an elaborate triumphal arch which was wedge-shaped in plan. As one passed through the arch observing its rich detail in doing so one then saw the columns lining the next stretch of street and as a result a casual stroller would be unaware that the road had changed direction. The next change of direction was masked by another monument, the tetrakionia - four groups of four columns - set at the intersection of the colonnaded street and another street running roughly at right angles. The road then continued straight until it reaches the Funerary Temple whose facade closes the vista. What an experience it must have been to walk along that street of tall columns with statues on the projecting brackets. Everywhere there were pieces of lively urban scenery to catch the eye, the projecting granite porch of the Baths of Diocletian, the arch, the tetrakionia, the facade of the funerary temple in the distance and cross streets with their tantalising vistas to lure the eye away from the main street. This was urban planning in the grand manner, possibly of a scale unequalled in ancient towns.
Not all of Palmyra was so grand and showy. Houses, like those throughout the ancient Mediterranean world, were unpretentious from the outside. The front door was the main feature in an otherwise plain whitewashed facade, but behind lay a shady courtyard, surrounded by columns in wealthier houses. All the main rooms faced inwards with their backs turned to the noisy, dirty street. The walls were frescoed and the floors enriched with mosaic or marble paving. The furniture was simple, but there were plenty of fine fabrics and rugs as well as an abundance of glass vessels. The Palmyrenes themselves must have been splendidly dressed to judge by the sculpture. Women were loaded down with jewellery, not only around their arms and necks, but also in their hair. Women were veiled and covered their faces when they walked in the street. Statues show them to have had straight Asiatic noses and large, almond eyes. The men are shown with curled hair and richly trimmed robes.

Palmyra was at the height of its wealth and power in the 3rd Century, a time of great difficulty for Rome itself. The capital had been racked by civil wars as emperor succeeded emperor almost annually. Soon the barbarians began to break through the Roman frontiers in the north-east and the east. The threat from the east came from the Sassanians who became the dominant power in the region after the collapse of the Parthian empire. Rome, beset by dangers closer to home, was not in a position to help Palmyra and as a result she became fiercely independent and prepared her own defences. The position looked very grim in 260 AD when the Sassanians conquered all of Syria and arrived at Antioch. The lowest ebb in Rome's fortunes came when the Emperor Valerian was captured by Sapor, the Sassanian king, at Edessa. Despite this disaster the Palmyrenes fought back. Septimius Odainatus, the Palmyrene Governor of Syria inflicted a heavy defeat on the Sassanians and was so buoyed by his own success that he assumed the eastern title 'king of kings'. Probably much to Rome's relief he as murdered in 267 AD, only to be succeeded by his wife, Zenobia, who seemed even more ambitious than her husband. At this point Rome decided to act and sent an army against her. As the rest of the empire watched in amazement, Zenobia proceeded to defeat the Romans with the same army that had defeated Sapor. Dazzled by her own success she felt that nobody could stop her now, and seized the whole province of Syria. Her armies seemed invincible and even Rome had to stand by helplessly and watch. In 269 AD she invaded Egypt and had conquered it within a year. Next she attacked Asia Minor and proclaimed her son 'Augustus'. This was too much for Rome. The Roman Emperor, Aurelian, gathered a great army and reconquered Asia Minor. Soon he was in Antioch, and then at the gates of Palmyra itself. Zenobia fled, Ironically, to the Sassanians, but she was returned to Palmyra and led in triumph to Rome. The Romans perhaps respected this defiant and ambitious woman because they did not put her to death. Instead she lived out the rest of her days in Tivoli like another Napoleon in exile. Did she ever come to love the olive-clad slopes and streams of Tivoli or did she always pine for the red desert and waving palm trees of her home? We will never know, but we do know that she never returned to Palmyra again.

The town declined after her death and finally in 634 AD, surrendered to the Arab armies. It sank into obscurity in the Middle Ages although most of the columns of the colonnaded street still stood as a lonely landmark in the desert. When the Renaissance reawakened men's interest in antiquity visitors again started to make their way to Palmyra. Perhaps the most famous ones were Robert Wood and James Dawkins who went there to draw the buildings in 1751. The rediscovery of Palmyra had great influence on later 18th Century architecture in Europe, but, even so, Wood's elegant terraces in Bath modelled on the architecture of Palmyra are a world away from the torrid Syrian desert which once rang to the cries of Zenobia and her all-conquering army. One can still sense her spirit as one walks along the colonnaded street or climbs up to the Ottoman Castle which broods over the ruins. As one's eyes scan the boundless desert, the morning wind still moans through the oasis and one could believe that it is not the breeze that is rustling through the palm trees but the restless spirit of Palmyra's queen, ready again to lead her armies against Rome.