islamique, J.G. met en évidence les constantes du rôle de la vallée: le rôle militaire avec les nombreux sites fortifiés, le rôle de peuplement avec une forte densité des agglomérations et des nécropoles creusées dans les rives souvent abruptes de la vallée, le rôle nourricier pour les hommes, bêtes et cultures, le rôle de circulation des hommes, des armées et des marchandises et, bien sûr, le rôle de foyer d’échanges culturels. Tous aspects qui font de ce fleuve un véritable creuset de civilisation.

Le style est clair, sans lourdeur de tournure et d’une orthographe impeccable, ce qui traduit l’excellence de la formation de son auteur.

Enfin, on appréciera l’importance des instruments fournis par l’auteure en fin d’ouvrage, avec, en particulier une liste des sites, une bibliographie de 40 pages (sic!) et trois Indices de noms de sites ou de personnes. Tout ceci fait de cette publication un instrument de travail impressionnant et efficace.

Cette remarquable publication renouvelle donc de manière approfondie nos connaissances sur une région majeure du Proche-Orient non méditerranéen. Mais cette importance de l’ouvrage s’est accrue avec la guerre qui s’est déclenchée au printemps 2011 et qui n’a pas encore réellement pris fin, en particulier dans cette région de Syrie où Daesh continue de s’arcbouter.

Or, ce qui est rarement souligné, tous les sites archéologiques de la région ont subi un pillage systématique à grande échelle, contrôlé et organisé – parfois avec des instruments de détection modernes. Une catastrophe patrimoniale considérable dont la région ne se relèvera jamais… Heureusement, la Direction des Antiquités de Syrie a pu sauver, souvent de manière très risquée, les objets qui se trouvaient dans les musées des secteurs menacés de la région.

Ainsi, grâce à la publication de cette importante Vallée engloutie recensant plus de 200 sites s’échelonnant le long de la vallée de l’Euphrate, et à l’action de préservation du matériel archéologique des musée de la vallée, une partie considérable du patrimoine historique et archéologique de Syrie a pu être préservée d’une disparition totale et pourra continuer à s’intégrer dans les futures recherches et publications sur les civilisations de l’Orient ancien.

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In May, 2015, Islamic State (Daesh) captured Palmyra and began a campaign of destruction against both people (regime soldiers and locals) and historical monuments. The horror, focusing attention on this famous city of antiquity, inspired many to write about it. Annie and Maurice Sartre, specialists in the ancient history and archaeology of Syria, have added their contribution, an introduction to Palmyra
intended for a general readership. The writing style is clear and energetic; the book is a pleasure to read. A short bibliography, consisting almost entirely of works in French, is provided at the end. Illustrations are only two: a map of modern Syria with provinces indicated, and a basic plan of Palmyra. For art and architecture one will have to look elsewhere.

The book is organized not as a standard historical narrative presented in chronological order, but as a series of questions-and-answers on different aspects of Palmyra’s history. Each of the 29 chapters has as its title a statement, almost always some mistaken but widely held view of the city. Below the chapter title are quotations from other works that express these erroneous opinions. The authors then aim to set matters right, and give a full discussion of that aspect of Palmyra. This approach works well, and gives the book its particular appeal. Controversies that have surrounded the city’s history are highlighted; the reader is thus well prepared for the discussion that follows, with the authors’ interpretations and the evidence that supports them.

Themes raised during the course of the book include the origins of Palmyra, the ethnic composition of its people, the role of geography, the nature of its government, its economy (with an evaluation of the importance of trade), its building history (fortifications, temples, housing, neighborhoods), religious practices, funerary monuments, and an evaluation of the influence of Greek and Roman cultures. As one would expect, the dramatic events of the later third century have a prominent place, with a detailed look at the careers of Odainath and Zenobia. The history of the city after Zenobia is tracked, from late antique to Ottoman times. We also learn of early foreign visitors (seventeenth–nineteenth centuries) and of the scientific exploration of the ruins. The final chapters move beyond Palmyra to a larger scale: reflections on Syrian uses of history, problems of promoting the country’s cultural heritage, and the changing geographical identity of ‘Syria’ through the ages. Interesting though these topics may be, these chapters do not connect with the rest of the book but take it in a tangential direction.

Let me highlight certain issues that particularly interested me. First, the question of ethnicity. Syrian nationalists have wanted to see Arabs present in Palmyra at an early date, from the early Iron Age. Evidence supports a Semitic component, but not specifically Arab. Aramaic would become the main language for private use. The official language of the city would be Greek, however, as befitted a city in the eastern Roman Empire, but there are no sure traces of Greeks living there. Latin is rare. We might assume Greek merchants passed through, as well as Latin-speaking soldiers from the western empire, even if the evidence is lacking. Names recorded in inscriptions might hide ethnicity, or ethnicities. Persian (Parthian) costumes are illustrated, and some Persian names are attested, but these could be cultural borrowings in this city close to the Roman-Persian frontier.

Second, the nature of the city’s government. The authors stress that Palmyra was a Syrian city like others, not an exception. It became a polis on the Greek model at some unknown date but before the Roman annexation, with characteristic political and administrative institutions. In the time of the Severans, Palmyra became a
Roman colony, an upgrade in its status, but still following standard Roman practice. Palmyra was thus not a city run by a network of merchant families.

At stake here is the understanding of the city’s geography and economy. Located in the desert, Palmyra has a reputation of a city built on the caravan trade. Inscriptions (dating from 19 to 264) focus on caravans that crossed the desert to and from Mesopotamia, with trade continuing along the rivers to the Persian Gulf. Products were brought from Africa and south and east Asia, areas accessible from the Indian Ocean. Less clear is Palmyrene trade westward to the Mediterranean world and whether Palmyrenes sold Roman products to the east, to exchange for the precious items of Asia and Africa. In the third century, the Sassanians took control of Mesopotamia, creating difficulties for Palmyrene access to the rivers and the Persian Gulf. Later trade routes favored following the Euphrates and Tigris further north, avoiding the desert crossing and causing economic decline for Palmyra.

The relationship between this caravan economy and the city government is unclear. Also uncertain is the role of farming in the vicinity of Palmyra. What contribution did farms make to the economy? Products entering and exiting the city were taxed; the Romans had a customs point outside the city. Salt production was taxed, as was water use. How were farm products taxed?

Third, the influence of Greek and Roman cultures. As noted, the authors stress that Palmyra is to be considered a city of the Hellenistic and Roman east, even if the population was Semitic. The elite enjoyed many aspects of Greek and Roman culture, in private and in public. Men might wear togas, as Roman citizens. Their houses featured Greek architectural features, with floor mosaics decorated with Greek mythological scenes. But the issue is complicated and not fully understood. For example, only one bath complex was found. Did Palmyrenes use it, or did it appeal to foreigners? And there is no evidence for Greek-style athletic games. Divinities were mostly Semitic, although they were given Greek names in Greek inscriptions (Zeus, Artemis, Poseidon). Some evidence for direct borrowing exists: Tyche/Fortuna and Nemesis, notably. Temples may have some Greek architectural features, such as columns, pilasters, and decorative motifs. However, the plans, with an open-air cella inside and courts surrounding the temple outside, are local. Religious practices were not Greek. One detail concerning dedications nicely shows the difference: in a bilingual inscription from the Nabu sanctuary, the Aramaic version says that gods Herta, Nanai, and Rasaf together with their priests dedicated the statue of a man named Ogeilu (to honor him); this combination of divine and human efforts would be strange to Greeks. In contrast, in the Greek version, Hera, Artemis, and Rasaf ordered the priests to set up the statue to Ogeilos (also named as Alexander) – an action more understandable to Greeks.

Fourth, Odainath and Zenobia. The authors emphasize that they lived and acted within the Roman context. We do not know why Zenobia and her son, Wahballath, decided to expand their control throughout southwest Asia, Egypt, and Anatolia, and this book does not propose a definite answer. Economic reasons may have been an important factor, though: Sassanian control over Mesopotamia would have limited Palmyrene access to trade routes leading to the Persian Gulf, as noted above, so Zenobia may have wished to reassert Palmyrene control over other routes, such
as the Red Sea. Businessmen in Egyptian Alexandria may have given crucial backing. In any case, Zenobia aimed to have her son proclaimed emperor in Rome, by the Senate. She was not leading a revolt of independence from Rome, but was working within the imperial system to take it over. This is credible, say our authors, because of the instability of imperial succession in the 3rd century. Anyone with sufficient military support could become emperor, so why not Wahballath? This view counters the popular image of Zenobia as an anti-imperialist, anti-colonialist heroine fighting for independence from Rome. In the end, she did not succeed. How she ended her days is another matter of uncertainty.

Fifth and last, I was intrigued by the history of Palmyra after Zenobia and the reconquest of Aurelian. The city did not disappear, although it went into decline. Diocletian built a camp; Christianization advanced from the 4th century on; and Justinian restored the city walls. After the Muslim conquest, the Umayyads continued the settlement. The last spectacular construction was the castle on the nearby hilltop, built in 1230, later refurbished either by Fakhr ed-Din, a Druze emir from Lebanon in the late sixteenth-early seventeenth century, or by the Ottomans in the eighteenth century. Foreign visitors appeared from the mid-seventeenth century on. Indeed, the location of the ancient city had never vanished.

And today? From 2012, even before IS/Daesh captured Palmyra, looting and pillaging devastated the city and its region, like many places in Syria. Now the major buildings lie destroyed. What next? Despite the many difficulties not only of this latest war but of the past century, the authors end their book on a note of hope that the fortunes of Syria will take a turn for the better.

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Our world seems to be divided between those ancient historians and archaeologists who like to theorise in abstract terms about their work and others, of a practical bent, who are more intent on finding evidence about the past than on offering abstract analyses, which – to them – may seem of doubtful value. No doubt, this division reflects a genetic predisposition of the people involved and has no particular reflection on the value of ‘theorising’. Sub specie aeternitatis possibly it is the latter approach which is more valuable. The books reviewed here concern the