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Review Article

Danish diaries of Palmyra

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HARALD INGHOLT, edited and commented on by RUBINA RAJA, JULIA STEDING & JEAN-BAPTISTE YON. 2021. *Excavating Palmyra. Harald Ingholt's excavation diaries: a transcript, translation and commentary (two volumes)*. Turnhout: Brepols; 978-2-503-59531-3 hardback €190.

Many things that we now call ‘archaeological archives’ are actually personal collections of documentation made and amassed by archaeologists, some of which have found their way into institutions. This is indeed the case for the collections of Harald Ingholt (1896–1985), a Danish archaeologist and philologist who worked at Palmyra in the 1920s and 1930s and had a long career that was spent mostly in the USA at Yale University, studying Syrian and Gandharan sites. Ingholt’s field diaries, published in the volumes under review, make up part of a collection which he donated, following his retirement, to the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek in Copenhagen in the early 1980s; that collection also includes his personal reference material, known as ‘The Ingholt Archive’. Comprising sheets with Palmyrene images glued to them, the Archive is planned for separate publication by Brepols in the near future.

With *Excavating Palmyra*, Raja, Steding and Yon have provided a major service to the discipline in their production of two mammoth volumes reproducing Ingholt’s diaries made at Palmyra—making them accessible to many more people than could have accessed them in their Danish home. Following useful introductory essays, each page of the diaries, including their endpapers and even every blank leaf, is carefully reproduced in full colour, along with transcription, translation and commentary provided on facing pages, lavishing them with the same care and attention that would be afforded to Palmyrene objects in a glossy museum catalogue.

The diaries were made by Ingholt in 1924, 1925 and 1928; no comment is made on the lack of diaries for 1926 or 1927, although it is noted by Raja that no diaries from Ingholt’s time at Palmyra during the 1930s have been found. There are six diaries in all, but as one is a draft of another, it is included as an appendix, and the diaries are numbered 1–5. Although some of the objects and inscriptions which appear in the diaries have been previously published, much of the material is new. Photographs and squeezes (a type of physical impression) of inscriptions which were once associated with the diaries, and which they often refer to, are no longer extant, but photographs and illustrations of related material are reproduced in short sections interspersed between the diaries, including photos from the private collections of Ingholt’s descendants.

The diaries are not only a record of Palmyrene archaeology but of Ingholt’s working life, and annotations—some made in red ballpoint pen—refer to publications decades after the original notes were made, showing that Ingholt referred to this material for many years after he first created it. The reproductions are so good that it is possible to get a sense of

the materiality of the diaries—Ingholt must have referred to his diary of Palmyrene tombs so often that he had to reinforce its binding with clear sticky tape. The commentary provided is generally limited to information relating to the inscriptions that are described by Ingholt, and translations of the Aramaic and Danish are given, but not the German or French in Ingholt's polyglot notes. Much care has been taken by Yon to link Ingholt's transcriptions of ancient texts to known inscriptions in the corpora where possible, and he has been very successful at doing so. While not all the objects in the diaries can be linked to contexts, it is clear that the editors have made every effort, wherever possible, to link Ingholt's sketches and drafted notes to known material; supplementary material includes Ingholt's map of graves, as well as lists by the volume's editors of all tombs mentioned in the diaries (more than 100), along with concordances of published and unpublished inscriptions noted within them.

While the volumes under review are entitled *Excavating Palmyra*, archaeological excavation in the sense of digging trenches or contextual excavation takes up a relatively small part of Ingholt's diaries, not least because many of the tombs he investigated had already been disturbed. In addition to his descriptive visual surveys, many of which naturally focused on sculpture and inscriptions, there is also much collecting and purchasing of inscriptions noted, as well as of sculpture and *tesserae* (in a Palmyrene context, these are stamped clay tickets for religious banquets). For that collecting, he relied on a series of local informants, who he often names, for information and access; locals also provided labour not only for digging and clearing monuments but also for having his acquisitions "dragged back to the hotel" (p. 909).

Given such material, it is perhaps surprising that Raja's introduction to the diaries, while providing a useful overview of Danish research on Palmyra, Ingholt's life and Palmyra's ancient history, spends little time on the French Mandatory context of the diaries' production in the 1920s. She does, however, note an interesting silence in the diaries—Ingholt must have witnessed the clearance of the Temple of Bel of its inhabitants, whose homes were destroyed under Mandatory authorities, but he makes no remark on the topic. While the supporting material in the volumes focuses on the diaries as a source for information on Palmyrene inscriptions and objects, there is much else in them (both in what Ingholt mentions and what he does not) that provides a rich resource for future research, not only for the archaeology of Palmyra but also the history of its investigation. It is in this resource that the volume provides its greatest contribution. Ingholt, for example, wrote often about workers he employed and about the local community at Palmyra at the time he was there. Through Ingholt, obliquely, we get a sense of a community that was often very knowledgeable about its ancient past, and Ingholt reports repeatedly how specific members of that community guided him to inscriptions and reliefs which were (for example) built into or displayed in contemporary buildings.

In a time when much legacy material is being hastily and, arguably, unreflectively put online, it is a welcome change to have a volume reproducing crucial archaeological documentation published so carefully in physical volumes. Scans of the diaries have also been made freely available in their entirety online (at <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.c.5442765.v1>), although the transcription and commentary are only available in the published work. After decades in the dark of Ingholt's office drawers in New Haven and then on museum storage shelves in Copenhagen, Raja and her colleagues have done a great service in ensuring this important documentation of Palmyra's ancient and Mandate-era past is brought into the light.