

The “Beauty of Palmyra” and Qasr Abjad (Palmyra): new discoveries in the archive of Harald Ingholt

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Over recent decades an immense amount of scholarship on Palmyra has appeared, but remarkably little of it has concerned the city’s distinctive art. In the English-speaking world the groundbreaking handbook by M. A. R. Colledge, *The art of Palmyra* (1976), remains the standard work, as a successor to the first major effort in this field, *Studier over Palmyrensk Skulptur* (1928), by H. Ingholt, itself still a basic work on the chronology of funerary portraiture.¹ Ingholt (1896-1985) had conducted three excavation campaigns (1924, 1925, 1928) at Palmyra. Alongside his excavations he prepared an archive of more than 800 Palmyrene funerary portraits with photographs of most, as well as bibliographic references and his own datings; he used this archive as the basis for his book. His detailed diaries of his excavation campaigns are also held in the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek. In them he described some of his finds, including sculptures and inscriptions. Many of these pieces were published by him in *Berytus*,² but a number were not. From the diaries it has been possible to locate a number of tombs and set additional sculptures within their original contexts.

In the West necropolis (also known as the Valley of Tombs; fig. 1) one particular tomb, Qasr Abjad, was excavated in November 1928 by Ingholt’s team (figs. 2-3 below).³ Here his workmen made a discovery which caused him to express his surprise and delight in his diary.⁴ They found, he says, “den smukkeste kvindebuste, jeg endnu har set” (“the most beautiful female bust I have seen thus far”).⁵ The quality of the sculpture and the impeccable state of preservation of its many colours caused him to apply to the Rask Ørsted Foundation for funds to acquire the piece for the collections of the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek,⁶ although in the museum files there is no mention of the bust having been excavated by Ingholt or of its original context; indeed, it is listed as “probably acquired from a private collection”.⁷ In his diaries, however, Ingholt mentions that the bust had been excavated when he returned one afternoon to Qasr Abjad.⁸ Deriving from this tomb is

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- 1 M. A. R. Colledge, *The art of Palmyra* (London 1976); H. Ingholt, *Studier over Palmyrensk skulptur* (Copenhagen 1928).
 - 2 H. Ingholt, “Five dated tombs from Palmyra,” *Berytus* 2 (1935) 57-119; “Inscriptions and sculptures from Palmyra I,” *Berytus* 3 (1936) 83-128; “Inscriptions and sculptures from Palmyra II,” *Berytus* 5 (1938) 93-140.
 - 3 R. Raja, A. H. Sørensen and J.-B. Yon (edd.), *The excavation diaries of Harald Ingholt. The Palmyra Expeditions 1924, 1925 and 1928* (Copenhagen forthcoming) diary 4 (1928) 18, 20, 26, and diary 5, 102-05a; H. Ingholt, “Palmyra Skønheden i Glyptoteket,” *Berlingske Tidende*, December 1929, 7.
 - 4 Ingholt gives almost the same citation in two places, because he operated with both an on-site diary and a summarizing (concordance) diary which took into account all of his excavations. The summarizing diary was compiled after the last campaign in 1928.
 - 5 Raja, Sørensen and Yon (supra n.3) diary 4 (1928) 18; diary 5, 103. At this point he had excavated more than 40 tombs and had seen a large number of funerary busts.
 - 6 M. L. Sargent and R. H. Therkildsen, “The technical investigation of sculptural polychromy at the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek 2009-2010 – an outline,” in J. S. Østergaard (ed.), *Tracking colour. The polychromy of Greek and Roman sculpture in the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Preliminary report 2* (2010) 11-26 (available at <http://www.trackingcolour.com/>)
 - 7 F. O. Hvidberg-Hansen and G. Ploug, *Palmyra Samlingen* (Copenhagen 1993) 122.
 - 8 Raja, Sørensen and Yon (supra n.3) diary 5, 103.