

THE FIRST ARCHAEOLOGIST OF PALMYRA

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The discovery of the ancient site of Palmyra was one of the most fascinating chapters in a learned cognizance of Antiquity and a visit to the site was considered for over two hundred years as a spectacular personal achievement. There is the first traveler to set foot in the ruins, the first European and the first Pole – who was Waclaw Rzewuski, the Emir Tadj el-Fahr, in search of Arab horses – the first author of a publication, the first artist to draw an image of the site, the first woman, the first epigraphist, the first architect, the first photographer. One should not forget the first archaeologist, because Palmyra is an important archaeological site.

Archaeological digging in Palmyra did not start until the middle of the 19th century. Visits to the sites before that were relatively brief and devoted to documenting architectural monuments and obtaining epigraphic records and sculptures. Travelers, who succeeded in reaching Palmyra – travel from Beirut was difficult and dangerous for Europeans – expected a romantic stay in ancient ruins standing in the desert. Scientific work was not on their agenda. The situation changed somewhat after the establishment of a British consulate in Damascus in 1834. In the following years more diplomats and scientists arrived in Damascus, and soon that small community of Europeans began traveling and visiting ancient sites. Special military protection was needed because of local riots and social unrest in Ottoman Syria until 1861 (Tarazi 1995). This explains the small number of reports and memoirs from the first half of the 19th century.

Traveling into the desert was an expensive pleasure for those who wanted and a profitable business for those able to offer the necessary services. Lady Jane Digby, who had settled in Damascus in 1853 and married the Bedouin Sheikh el Mezrab, provided Europeans with such services. In 1869 she met in Damascus and befriended the new British Consul, Captain Richard Burton and his wife Isabel Arundell (Rice 2001: 505–540; Keenan 2008: 167–177).