A view down the main colonnaded street of Palmyra looking north. Brackets on the columns once held statues of the city’s elite. On the distant hilltop is the medieval castle, Qalaat Shirkuh, severely damaged in 2015. To the right are the ruins of the domestic quarter.

Cornell University, Carl A. Kroch Library.
Palmyra 1885

The PHOTOGRAPHS of JOHN HENRY HAYNES

BY ROBERT OUSTERHOUT

“We pitched our tent by the little sun temple,” wrote John Henry Haynes, as his party arrived at Palmyra in April 1885, “setting our table within its sacred precincts.” Nearing the end of their journey, Haynes and his companions had spent the previous months traversing Mesopotamia, looking for a suitable site for an American excavation—this was the exploratory mission that led to the Penn Museum’s excavations at Nippur (in modern Iraq), begun a few years later.
A six-day ride from the Euphrates basin, the ancient oasis city of Palmyra (in modern Syria) constituted a detour for their party—and was even the cause of some grumbling by its leader, Rev. William Hays Ward. Although blessed with legendary status and ruins of mythical proportions, Palmyra was not at all related to their Babylonian investigations. But with his modest reputation as an archaeological photographer, Haynes had been requested by the Archaeological Institute of America to photograph the caravan city as extensively as he could.

The party spent five days at the site. While his traveling companions recorded inscriptions, Haynes took nearly a hundred photographs—their number limited by the shortness of their visit, the quantity of glass plates their pack animals could carry, and the technical difficulties of early photography. On his best days, Haynes was able to shoot at most two dozen photographs. Many are stunning views, for Palmyra was and remains a uniquely picturesque city. For Haynes and the others, its majestic colonnades and temples offered a dramatic visual contrast to the mudbrick ruins of Babylonia. Although Haynes’s photographs are not the earliest views of Palmyra, they constitute one of the most comprehensive early collections of images. With recent events that have taken

ABOVE: Colonnades dominate the view across the southern sector of the city, seen from Diocletian’s Camp, with the Temple of Bel in the distance. Haynes took the photograph while standing atop the apse wall of the principia or Temple of the Standards. Emphasizing the spatial context, he composed the view with objects of interest in three distinct bands: the foreground, the middle distance, and the far distance. Cornell University, Carl A. Kroch Library.
a devastating toll on the monuments—the great Temple of Bel, the smaller Temple of Baalshamin, the monumental arch, the most visible of the tower tombs, and much of the figural sculpture were wantonly destroyed by the forces of the Islamic State in 2015—Haynes’s photographs are all the more precious.

Considered the father of American archaeological photography, John Henry Haynes (1849–1910) was the official photographer for the United States’ first classical excavation, at Assos (in modern Turkey) under the auspices of the Archaeological Institute of America (1881–84), as well as for the country’s first venture into biblical archaeology, the Penn Museum’s excavation at Nippur (1889–1900). The Penn Museum Archives is the repository of several thousand of his photographs, as well as his travel diaries and correspondence. Frequent visitors to the Penn Museum will know Haynes for the majestic photograph from the excavation at Nippur, hanging at the entrance to the Rainey Auditorium.

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Exploring Tombs, Temples, and more

Opposite: The early 3rd-century CE funerary temple positioned at the western end of the decumanus forms a visual terminus for the grand colonnaded street. The only tomb inside the city, it is sometimes associated with the family of the legendary queen Zenobia. Cornell University, Carl A. Kroch Library.

Bottom left: Startlingly direct in their gaze, the funerary portraits from Palmyra depict the elite in a fashionable mix of Roman and local costume. A woman, wearing a Palmyrene head-dress and Roman veil, holds her palm outward in an apotropaic gesture; a priest with a conical hat holds a branch and gestures with his hands; another priest, lavishly garbed with an ornamental collar and brooch, hold vessels for libations. Cornell University, Carl A. Kroch Library.

Bottom center: All that remains of an atrium house are the four columns that once framed the impluvium, the water basin at the center of the small courtyard. Haynes erroneously identified this as a mausoleum. The two right columns frame a view toward the funerary temple. Cornell University, Carl A. Kroch Library.

Bottom right: The Tower Tomb of Elahbel (no. 13) and his three brothers, built in 103 CE, was the largest of the Palmyrene tower tombs, dramatically set in the hills surrounding the city. Haynes composed the photograph to include other tomb towers in the middle and far distance. This and other prominent funerary monuments were destroyed in 2015. Cornell University, Carl A. Kroch Library.
**Views of the Monumental Arch**

**opposite**: One of the signature monuments at the center of Palmyra, the monumental arch was constructed at the height of the city’s prosperity. Wedge-shaped in plan, the monument subtly resolves the change of axis as the Great Colonnade turns southward to meet the Temple of Bel—the direction from which the photograph was taken. Arab villagers wander through the scene. The arch was destroyed in 2015. Cornell University, Carl A. Kroch Library.

**below**: A view of the Great Colonnade by Beirut-based photographer, Félix Bonfils (ca. 1867–76), looking toward the monumental arch with the Temple of Bel in the distance. While similar to Haynes’s views, Bonfils had reduced the city to a series of picturesque clichés. PM image 166176.
Views of the Temple of Bel

opposite top: A rebuilt wall of the temenos of the Temple of Bel, the columns of its double portico rising behind it, while the ashlar blocks of its original construction lie tumbled in the foreground. Although it was the major temple of the city, Haynes was not able to fully document it, as an Arab village had formed inside its enclosure and the temple itself had been converted to a mosque. Cornell University, Carl A. Kroch Library.

opposite bottom: At the Temple of Bel, the plain columns of the temenos on the left contrast with the fluted columns of the temple itself behind. The enclosure between is filled with the rough mudbrick houses of the Arab village, subsequently removed in the archaeological campaigns of the 20th century. The grandest temple of the city, it was destroyed in 2015. Cornell University, Carl A. Kroch Library.