Palmyra's Ephemeral Empire

by

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1

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ABSTRACT

The story of the third century AD rebellion of the Palmyrene Empire against the Roman Empire remains one of the most curious and fascinating episodes from the ancient world. Palmyra, a wealthy desert city-state, was neither the largest, richest, nor most significant city of the Roman Near East, yet it was the city that capitalized on Rome's weakness in the third century to lead its own independence movement, taking over vast swathes of wealthy territory for a brief period from approximately 270 to 273 AD.

But why was Palmyra the city to lead the revolt against Rome? And how was it so successful for such a short time? At first glance, it would appear that Palmyra was ill-suited to successfully carve an independent state. Yet the city's distinctive history and culture actually suggest that it was uniquely positioned to contest Rome for supremacy of the Near East. Palmyra's economic, military, and cultural history left it in an exceptional situation in the third century. This thesis supplements readings of the textual evidence preserved by literary sources including the Historia Augusta and Zosimus with an examination of archaeological, epigraphic, and numismatic evidence to reveal the importance of Palmyra's history in understanding the episode of the Palmyrene Empire. The city's leaders capitalized on their past history and present position to attempt their challenge against Rome which, while ill-fated, is more understandable in the context of the period.

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Table of Contents

Chapter 1: A City in the Desert: Palmyra and its Surviving Sources

<u>Introduction</u>

The fascinating story of the Palmyrene Empire at times reads like a novel: a tiny desert city state challenged the world's foremost empire. The city itself was filled with colorful and ambitious personalities, palace intrigue, and murder, and it led a series of campaigns across distant lands. All of these elements play into the curious and captivating story of Palmyra, a city-state at the periphery of the Roman Empire that, for a brief time in the third century AD, managed to conquer Rome's wealthiest provinces and establish its own empire. At the helm of Palmyra's empire was the ambitious and beautiful Zenobia, a towering figure who shaped the direction of her city, and who, according to our surviving sources, did so to indulge her hubristic desire for power, which eventually led to her and her city's destruction. Even at face value, the story is a mesmerizing and multifaceted tale. But accepting the story on the surface does not do justice to the enormous complexities that lie beneath it. Palmyra's rise and fall was the product of the interrelated histories of the city and the Roman Empire. But why did Palmyra get as far as it did? Roman instability in the third century is well-known, but it's empire was still the most powerful political entity in the world. And why was Palmyra the city to rebel instead of another? It was neither the largest nor the wealthiest city in the Roman Empire. In fact, it was not even the wealthiest or most important city in the local Syrian region – Antioch held that distinction. Ultimately, Palmyra's tale was made possible not only by the circumstances presented by a moment of Roman weakness and Persian strength, but also by its tradition of independence even while a part of the Roman Empire. That independent nature as well as the conditions that made it possible will be the focus of what follows.

The events of Palmyra's meteoric rise and fall make for a fascinating story, and the basic narrative must be understood before any analysis can be undertaken. In the short span of a few

4

centuries, the city of Palmyra emerged from the sands of the Syrian Desert to ultimately challenge Rome itself. The desert city-state, lacking natural resources, a large population, or defensible boundaries, is remembered by ancient writers as threatening the hegemony of the Roman Emperor himself and breaking away to create a formidable splinter state stretching from central Anatolia to Egypt and containing many of the Roman Empire's wealthiest provinces. Despite scant information remaining today, the legacy left by the curious case of Palmyra's rise and fall remains an important element of understanding the history of the ancient Near East, with its effects still being felt today.

Palmyra's Origins

The city of Palmyra is located at the center of the Syrian Desert, an expansive desert that stretches over modern-day Syria and Iraq (Fig. 1). The Syrian Desert lay between two major civilizations of the classical age, Rome to the west and Persia to the East (Fig. 2). Although it stood as a formidable barrier between these two powers, lacking water and inhabited by marauding nomadic tribes, trade did take place over the desert, and the desert was often the preferred route
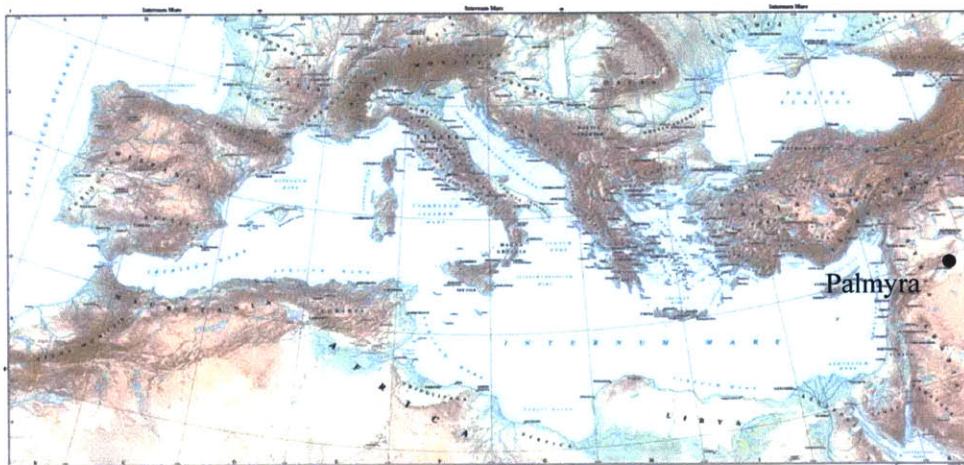

Figure 1: Palmyra in the Roman Empire[1]

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[1] Richard J. A. Talbert, ed. *Barrington Atlas of the Greek and Roman World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 10.
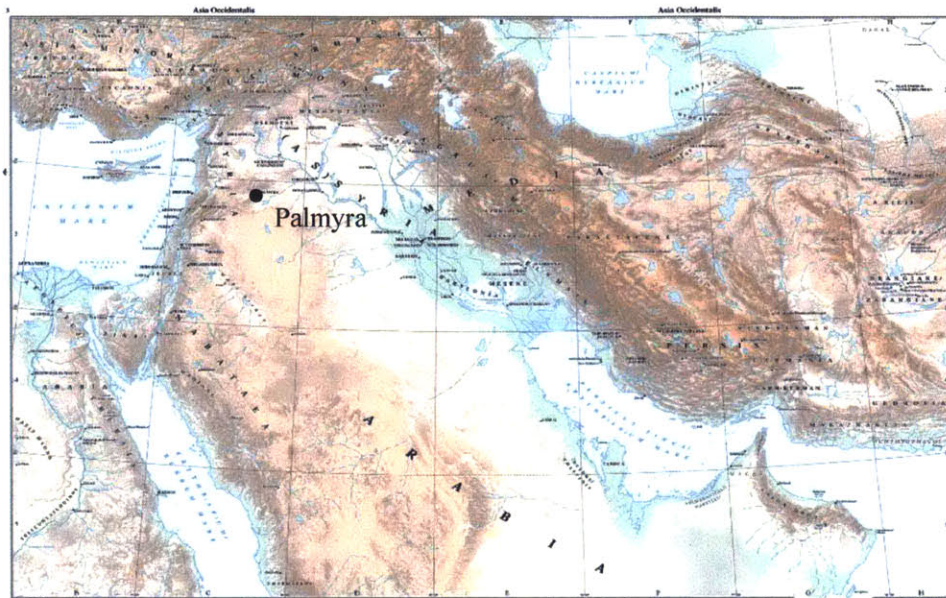
Figure 2: Palmyra between Rome and Persia[2]

for trade caravans to travel instead of the dangerous mountains of Cilicia and eastern Anatolia

The city of Palmyra was unique among the Roman Empire's principal cities for numerous reasons. Unlike the great metropolises of Greece, Italy, and Anatolia, Palmyra was a young city. Remnants from the city's sculptures and tombs suggest that while the Syrian Desert had long been occupied by Bedouin nomads, the city itself was not settled until the Hellenistic period, likely in the second century BC.[3] It was settled almost certainly as a result of its strategic location. At the heart of the Syrian Desert, its oasis was among the few sources of fresh water in the arid expanse. Caravans passing from Persian to Roman territory were safe to rest in the city and use its resources, provided they paid a toll.[4] The city became rich off the lucrative caravan trade passing through its borders, and it grew relatively quickly for an ancient city, in less than 200 years becoming a major

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[2] Ibid 12.
[3] Fergus Millar, *The Roman Near East*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994. 323.
[4] Ibid 331.

center for commerce connecting two economically important parts of the world. Palmyra's importance to the caravan trade, and vice versa, will be examined in detail.[5]

Another unique aspect of the city was its cosmopolitan culture. Although Palmyra was largely populated by Semitic speakers who spoke a Palmyrene language unique to the city, it also attracted visitors and residents from all over the ancient world. Due to its rise in the Hellenistic period, a heavy Greek influence is visible in its architecture and was likely reflected in its population. Shrines to Mesopotamian gods are present in the city, as are the remains of Zoroastrian fire temples. When the city came under Roman domain in the first century AD, the architecture adapted to reflect the new residents of the city. One of Palmyra's most recognizable pieces of architecture is its Grand Colonnade, the column-lined avenue leading up to the city's temple, the temple of Bel, dedicated to the Palmyrene version of the Phoenician god Ba'al. The colonnade was constructed in a Roman model in the second or third centuries AD, when Roman rule was at its peak (Fig. 3). This fusing of regional influences, and its impact on Palmyra's actions in the third century, will constitute a portion of the detailed analysis to follow.[6]

A final unusual feature of the city of Palmyra was its large degree of autonomy. Most cities in the Empire fell under the jurisdiction of the provincial governor, or another imperial magistrate. Some cities, however, were conferred an independent status, that of the *colonia*. Many *coloniae* were locations where retired legionaries could be settled, so they were considered more loyal to the Empire. They were often granted a tax-exempt status, or were permanently garrisoned with additional soldiers. Palmyra's status as a *colonia* was exceptional due in part to its lack of a sizeable Roman population. Certainly some of the city's inhabitants Roman, but the primary language of

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[5] See Chapter 2 below.
[6] See Chapter 4 below.

Figure 3: Grand Colonnade of Palmyra in 2014[7]

the city was still Palmyrene, with Latin being a secondary language of inscriptions on only some public monuments.[8] Palmyrene quasi-independence was further demonstrated by the presence of a seemingly-autonomous Palmyrene armed force. Pre-Roman Palmyra maintained some sort of army that was used to police caravan trade routes. Whether the army was state-controlled or was privately owned and operated by prominent citizens is not certain; in fact, the precise nature of this Palmyrene army will remain one of the primary aspects of Palmyra to be investigated.[9] Under Roman rule the imperially-directed Roman legions provided the majority of the military presence in the region. It is clear, however, that the Palmyrenes maintained their own force. The fifth-sixth century Byzantine historian Zosimus, writing about the failed Palmyrene revolt, noted that the Palmyrenes were both renowned for their highly skilled native archer units and were also able to muster a large force independent from Roman imperial control.[10] Palmyra held a unique place in

[7] Ancient Palmyra, British Broadcasting Channel accessed November 3, 2015, http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p02rd6rn.
[8] Millar, *The Roman Near East*. 321.
[9] See Chapter 3 below.
[10] Zosimus, *Historia Nova*. Trans. Ronald T. Ridley. Sydney: Australian Association for Byzantine Studies, 1982. 1.52.

the political landscape of the Roman Near East, and the events of the third century would thrust onto into the center stage of Rome's attention.

The Rise of Palmyra in the Roman East

Palmyra advanced to the forefront of Rome's eastern policy after the disaster of the Battle of Edessa in 260 AD, when the Emperor Valerian was defeated and taken prisoner by the forces of the Sassanid Persians. Compounding the turmoil caused by the capture of the emperor, the largest Roman army in the east was shattered, leaving no Roman force strong enough to police the Imperial and local interests in the porous region. The power vacuum in the wake of Edessa meant that the Persians could operate with near impunity. Sassanid forces took to raiding the border towns, advancing as far westward as Antioch and wreaking havoc on the Roman provinces of Syria and Mesopotamia and threatening much of the valuable Roman East.[11] In Rome, Valerian's son Gallienus was proclaimed emperor; desperate to protect his eastern provinces, he sought out whatever help he could find in repelling the Persian attacks.[12] Foremost among the resources left in the region was Palmyra, which itself commanded a significant army under the city's leader, Septimius Odenathus. It is important to note the uncertainty surrounding Odenathus' exact position. While the sources make it clear that Odenathus was Palmyra's political leader, his precise role is not apparent to modern eyes, and it may not have been apparent to Roman eyes either. The structure of the government of Palmyra is not known; the city had multiple prominent families that influenced the construction and likely leadership of the city, but the format of that leadership is uncertain. Odenathus appeared to rule both the city itself as well as the regional interests, including the city of Dura-Europos on the Euphrates River and most of the Syrian Desert, and commanded

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[11] David Potter, *The Roman Empire at Bay* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 217-226.
[12] Ibid 254.

an army which could deploy some distance from the city itself. Inscriptions found in Palmyra name

him the *ras*, or "king," of the city.[13] It is not unreasonable for a city in the region to have been

ruled by a king – many of Persia's local rulers styled themselves as kings, with the overall Persian

emperor being the "King of Kings."[14] Palmyra shared cultural ties with its eastern neighbor and

may have adopted a similar political lexicon.

Following the Roman defeat at Edessa, Odenathus gathered the surviving Roman troops in

the region and augmented his own native Palmyrene army to create a formidable force.[15] Again,

gaps in the sources make it difficult to be certain of the scope of the new Palmyrene army. Zosimus

records a force of more than 70,000 "Palmyrenes, Syrians, and barbarians" at Zenobia's disposal

a decade after Odenathus' exploits, while the fourth century Historia Augusta records an army

30,000 strong.[16] For reasons to be explored below, neither of these sources can be entirely trusted

to provide accurate details. Odenathus, either on his own initiative or at the request of Gallienus,

took an active role in patrolling the eastern provinces. The Historia Augusta briefly describes the

rule of Odenathus, explaining how he,

> seized the imperial power after the capture of Valerian, [for] with the strength of
> the Roman state exhausted, all would have been lost in the East. He assumed,
> therefore, as the first of his line, the title of King, and after gathering together an
> army he set out against the Persians... First of all, he brought under his power
> Nisibis and most of the East together with the whole of Mesopotamia, next, he
> defeated the king himself and compelled him to flee. Finally, he pursued [King]
> Sapor and his children even as far as Ctesiphon, and captured his concubines and
> also a great amount of booty; then he turned to the oriental provinces, hoping to be
> able to crush Macrianus, [a rebellious Roman general] who had begun to rule in
> opposition to Gallienus... After Macrianus was slain, Odenathus killed his son

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[13] Ibid 259.
[14] Ibid 259.
[15] Ibid 260; Zos 1.40; Historia Augusta. Trans. David Magie (Cambridge: Harvard University Press,1921), accessed October 16, 2015. *The Thirty Tyrants* 15.50-56. http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/ Historia_Augusta/home.html
[16] Zos 1.52; Historia Augusta, *The Thirty Tyrants*, 15.50-56.

Quietus also... Then, after he had for the most part put in order the affairs of the East, he was killed by his cousin.[17]

Zosimus also recounts the story of Odenathus' campaigns against the Persians. His *Historia Nova* tells how,

> Gallienus ordered Odenathus, the Palmyrene, a man highly esteemed because of the honor the emperors had shown to his ancestors, to assist the East where the situation was desperate. [Odenathus] joined the largest possible force of his own men and the legions which remained in the East and vigorously attacked [King] Sapor, recapturing the cities already possessed by the Persians. Nisibis, which had been taken by Sapor and was pro-Persian, he overwhelmed and razed to the ground. Then pursuing them as far as Ctesiphon, not once but twice he shut the Persians up in their own city so that they were glad to save their children, wives and selves, while he restored order in the lands already pillaged as far as he could. While he was at Emesa, however... he was killed in a conspiracy.[18]

The similarities and differences in these accounts, and the scant details that can be gleaned, will be examined below.

Odenathus was joined on his campaigns by the other Roman officials in the region who still maintained power, Macrianus and Callistus. The Palmyrene leader successfully campaigned against the Sassanids, expelling them from the Syrian province and back to the region beyond the Euphrates. He twice advanced all the way to the Persian capital, Ctesiphon, but was unable to take the city. Throughout this time, from the catastrophe at Edessa in 260 AD until his eventual death around 267 AD, Odenathus led his forces on near constant campaigns, from the southern Syrian Desert to eastern Anatolia and deep into the Persian heartland. During this time, compounding the renewed Persian threat, Rome's principate suffered a succession crisis. Gallienus, the son of Valerian, was the nominal emperor in Rome. However, his rule was partially delegitimized by the fact that his father was still alive and in captivity, which emboldened numerous pretenders to challenge his rule throughout the empire. On Odenathus' doorstep in Anatolia one of the leading

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[17] Ibid 15.50-56.
[18] Zos 1.69.

generals in the area, Macrianus, who had previously fought alongside Odenathus, declared his sons Macrianus and Quietus co-emperors in 261 AD. At this point Odenathus faced external threats to his territory from the Persians as well as two separate emperors, each declaring themselves the true Roman emperor, but one thousands of miles away in Rome and the other(s) directly on his doorstep in Anatolia. Odenathus faced a choice: he could cast his lot in with one of these emperors, or he could follow the model of the numerous pretenders and splinter states that had emerged during the previous decades and assert Palmyra's own independence. For reasons that remain uncertain, Odenathus betrayed Macrianus' son Quietus, attacking his army and killing him after his father and brother had already been killed on their march to Rome. Successful and apparently loyal to the emperor in Rome, Odenathus was recognized and rewarded for his exploits by Gallienus with a slew of imperial titles. Before his campaigns began in 261 AD Odenathus apparently already held the Palmyrene-language title *ras*, or roughly "king" of an individual city, as well as *rš dy tdmwr*, "Lord of Tadmor [Palmyra]."[19] He was given the further, Roman titles of *dux romanorum*, "commander of the Romans," a military title identifying his position as chief military commander in the east, and perhaps most importantly *corrector totius orientis*, "commander of the East," a hitherto nonexistent position of uncertain magnitude, potentially proclaiming Odenathus' supremacy over the Roman governors of the eastern provinces and the generals of the armies.[20] Additionally, according to the Historia Augusta, Odenathus became *imperator totius orientis*, "emperor of the east." Odenathus also proclaimed himself *mlk mlk'*, King of Kings, the title held by the Persian ruler, declaring his supremacy over his Sassanid neighbor.[21] Odenathus' extraordinary titles hypothetically gave him vast control over the Roman forces that continued to

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[19] Potter, *The Roman Empire at Bay*, 259.
[20] Ibid 259.
[21] Ibid 259.

remain in the region (Fig. 4) in what seems to be an unprecedented move, where a vassal king and non-Roman citizen apparently held sway over the imperial officials that remained in the east. This exceptional situation demonstrates the gravity of the crisis on Rome's eastern frontier. Armed with his titles and associated authorities, Odenathus acted quickly to salvage the situation.
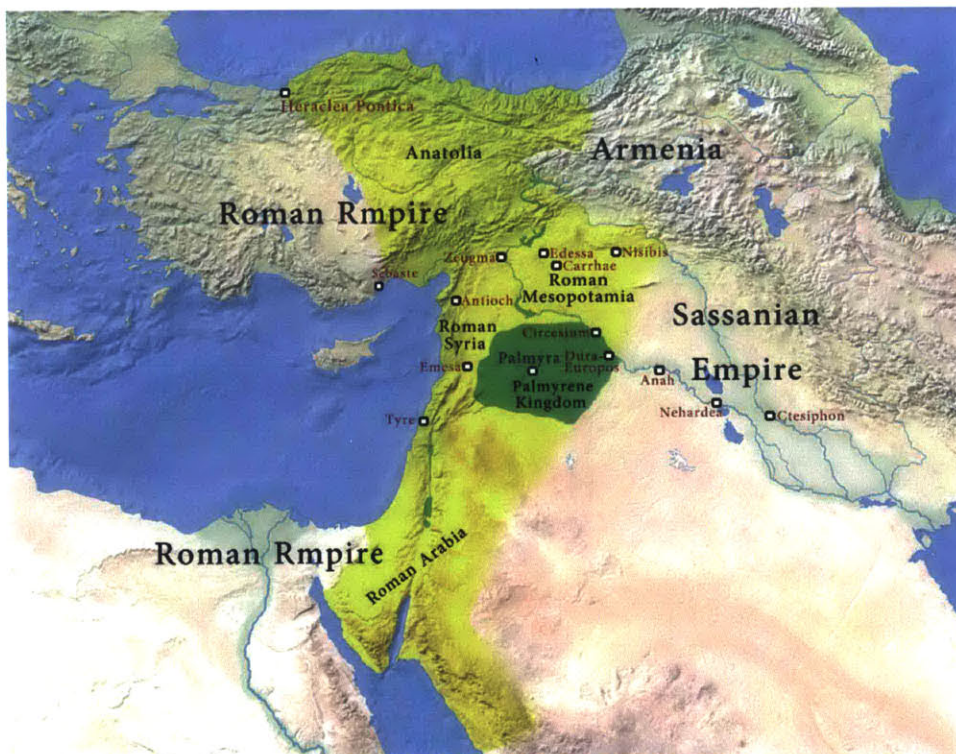

Figure 4: Hypothetical extent of Odenathus' authority under his Palmyrene title *ras* (green) and Roman titles *dux romanorum* and *corrector totius orentis* (yellow)[22]

The importance of Odenathus' successful campaigns is difficult to overstate. His defeat of the victorious Persian armies preserved Roman hegemony for another century in the Roman Near East. His apparent loyalty to Rome prevented further fracturing of the already vulnerable empire during a particularly susceptible period of weakness. Odenathus' campaigns also demonstrated that Palmyra's independent army was capable of operating for a considerable length of time and

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[22] Maps of Palmyra, Wikimedia, accessed May 12, 2016. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/
Category:Maps_of_Palmyra; note the incorrect spelling of "Roman Rmpire [*sic*]."

at great distances from the city itself, a proficiency that would soon be used when Palmyra broke away from Rome's control.

Transition of Rule from Odenathus to Zenobia

Though successful at increasing Roman security in the east, Odenathus' reign did not end with peace in the region. He was assassinated around 267 AD. Accounts of his assassination differ between sources. The most prevalent story explains that, while hunting somewhere in southeastern Anatolia, Odenathus reprimanded his nephew for an unknown slight. The nephew, stewing in anger over his uncle's rebuke, soon murdered his uncle as well as Odenathus' heir during a feast.[23] Zosimus notes Odenathus' death by treachery but fails to provide details.[24] The Historia Augusta explains that the cousin of Odenathus, a certain Maeonius, "murdered that excellent emperor, being moved thereto by nothing else than contemptible envy."[25] The author later suggests that Maeonius collaborated with Zenobia to kill Odenathus, allowing her to usurp power. Later writers point to his ambitious wife, Zenobia, as either the true killer or the instigator of the assassination. The story proposes that Zenobia poisoned her husband so that she could rule in place of their young son.[26] Still other sources point to Gallienus, embarrassed by his client king's successes where the Roman armies had failed, or to Persian saboteurs as the killers.[27] Regardless of the identity of the actual killer, it is certain that by 268 AD Odenathus was dead and his wife, Zenobia, had assumed the regency on behalf of their young son Septimius Vaballathus.

Vaballathus' age is not known, but he was apparently a minor at the time of his father's death, so his mother Zenobia took the crown. She took quick action to ensure her son's succession,

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[23] Potter, *The Roman Empire at Bay*, 260.
[24] Zos 1.46
[25] Historia Augusta, *The Thirty Tyrants*, 17.59.
[26] Potter, *The Roman Empire at Bay*, 259.
[27] Ibid 261.

conferring on him all of the titles that had formerly been held by her husband. While it was typical practice in the succession of many eastern rulers of Syria and Persia to pass down titles from father to son, most Roman titles were not hereditary. Therefore, it is possible that Vaballathus' assumption of Odenathus' Roman military and political titles may have been seen as a provocation against Roman power. Our analysis will reveal more details surrounding the uncertainty of Vaballathus' succession. However, the sources are clear in their assertion that Zenobia had an enormous influence on Vaballathus, and they point to her effective control over the Palmyrene state's affairs. There is a great deal of mystery surrounding Zenobia, the enigmatic and ambitious eastern queen who would later challenge Rome. She is described as "more a man than Gallienus" by the Historia Augusta, and Zosimus explains that "she was endowed with a man's mind, and aided by her husband's friends and advisors."[28] In addition to her other traits, the sources emphasize her ambition, which would eventually drive her to challenge Rome's supremacy over her city, and indeed, over the entire region.[29]

Assertion of Palmyrene Independence

Zenobia's first use of Palmyra's sizeable army is described as taking place in 270 AD, three years after Odenathus' death. It is not clear if the Persian threat had abated by this point, but it is certain that the emperor at the time, Claudius Gothicus, had his attention focused north on the threat presented by invading Goths (the defeat of whom earned Claudius his moniker). Zosimus describes how Zenobia dispatched her loyal general, Septimius Zabdas, with an army comprised of Palmyrene, Syrian, and "barbarian" soldiers south to Roman Arabia. The Roman garrison was slaughtered by the invading Palmyrenes.[30] Zabdas then turned his attention west to Egypt, the

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[28] Historia Augusta, *The Thirty Tyrants* 30.102; Zos 1.48.
[29] Historia Augusta, *The Thirty Tyrants* 15.50-30.109; Zos 1.39-60.
[30] Zos 1.44.

wealthiest province at the time and the most important source of grain for the city of Rome.[31] The

Roman prefect of Egypt, Tenagino Probus, mounted an energetic defense of his province utilizing

his 50,000 Egyptian and African soldiers, a potentially exaggerated number based on army sizes

and capabilities at the time.[32] Zosimus explains that a certain Timagenes, a Roman defector of

Syrian descent, showed the Palmyrenes a secret route by which to bypass the main Roman army.

Surrounded by the hostile Palmyrenes, Probus was forced to surrender.[33] Zosimus gives no reason

for Zenobia's conquests, only her ambition. The Historia Augusta explains that she was

capitalizing on the perceived weakness of the Roman emperors to empower her son.[34] Whatever

the reason, by late 270 AD Palmyra controlled a significant portion of what was once Roman

territory in the eastern provinces, from Antioch and northern Syria to Egypt (Fig. 5). According to

Zosimus, by that year Zenobia "controlled all Egypt and the East as far as Ancyra in Galatia; she

would also have liked to take over Bithynia as far as Chalcedon, had the Bithynians not heard of

Aurelian's elevation and shaken off Palmyrene control."[35] Zosimus does not mention resistance

by any of the peoples conquered by the Palmyrenes other than the Egyptians and Bithynians. The

former were still led by their Roman prefect and the latter were influenced by news of Aurelian's

assumption of the emperorship, perhaps indicating the extent of influence that the perception of

Roman strength had on the desire of the people of the Near East to support the more traditional

government in Rome or the new power exerted from Palmyra.

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[31] Potter, *The Roman Empire at Bay*, 266-268.
[32] Zos 1.44.
[33] Ibid 1.45.
[34] Historia Augusta, *The Thirty Tyrants* 30.102.
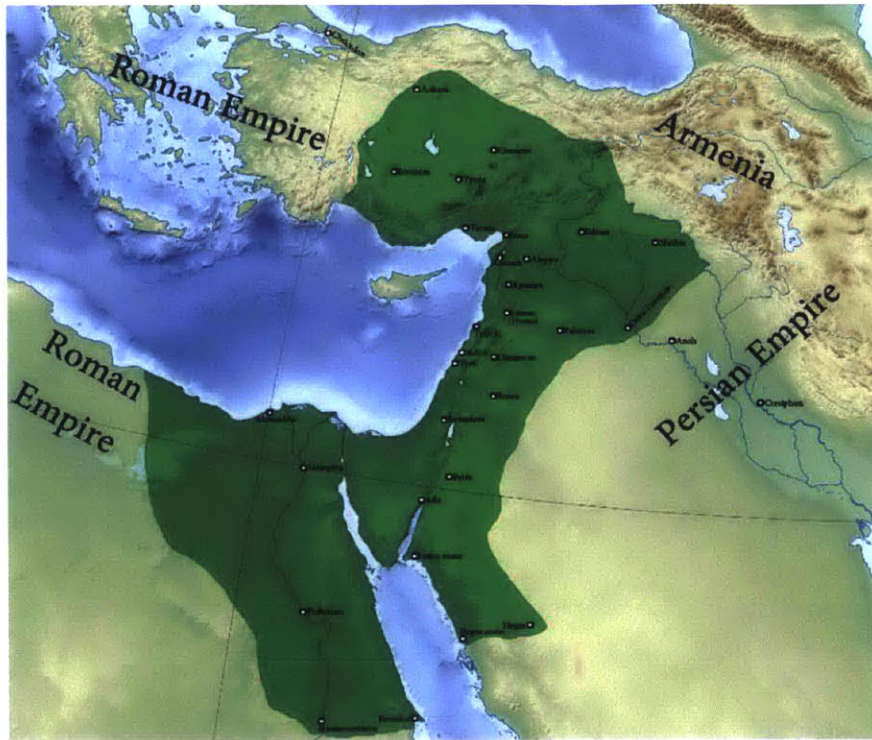[35] Zos 1.50.

Figure 5: Palmyrene Empire at its greatest extent in 270 AD[36]

Aurelian's Response to the Palmyrene Actions

Whatever the perceived status of Palmyra and of Zenobia's role at its head, Aurelian's campaign against her demonstrates that the situation was no longer tenable in the eyes of the Roman Emperor. Aurelian ascended to the principate in 270 AD, succeeding Claudius and quickly defeating his predecessor's brother Quintillus to hold the title.[37] Despite his early success, however, Aurelian's rule was far from unchallenged. Aurelian inherited a divided empire. In the west the provinces of Gaul and Britain were in open rebellion under the rule of Tetricus, who had himself inherited what is now called the "Gallic Empire," a splinter state established by a rebellious general Postumus in 260 AD against the rule of Gallienus. To the north rebellious Dacian legions

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[36] "Palmyrene Empire," Wikiwand, accessed November 4, 2015, http://www.wikiwand.com/en/ Palmyrene_Empire.
[37] Alaric Watson, *Aurelian and the Third Century*, (New York: Routledge, 1999), 51.

conspired with invading Gothic barbarians, and to the east Zenobia led Palmyra's ascendancy over the wealthy eastern provinces. An experienced general and former commander of the famed Dalmatian cavalry, Aurelian moved quickly to quell the unrest. He first defeated the invading Goths before mobilizing a significant army in Chalcedon in 272 AD.[38] Confident in the size and experience of his force, Aurelian began his eastward march, reconquering the cities of Anatolia with relative ease. He encountered Palmyra's substantial army north of Antioch and defeated it, scattering the forces and causing Zenobia and Zabdas to flee from Antioch, a major symbolic blow to the Palmyrene cause. Palmyra mustered what forces remained and mobilized at Emesa, northwest of Palmyra at the edge of the Syrian Desert. Aurelian again emerged victoriously from the battle, destroying the remainder of the Palmyrene army. He then took the important action of forgiving the populace of the former Palmyrene-controlled cities, reincorporating them into the Empire. The true extent of their brief disincorporation will be explored later. Aurelian finally besieged Palmyra itself in 273 AD. When Zenobia attempted to flee to the Persians, she was captured and brought before Aurelian. The city itself quickly surrendered and was also spared by Aurelian.[39] The city would later rebel once more under a relative of Zenobia, causing it to be captured and razed by Aurelian's army.

Zenobia's fate following her capture is another lingering question from the peculiar story of Palmyra's "revolt." According to the Historia Augusta, Zenobia "was led in triumph with such magnificence that the Roman people had never seen a more splendid parade... Her life was then granted her by Aurelian, and thereafter she lived with her children in the manner of a Roman matron on an estate which had been presented to her at Tibur," an unexpectedly tranquil end for a

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[38] Ibid 79; Zos 1.50.
[39] Watson, *Aurelian and the Third Century* 83; Zos 1.56; Historia Augusta, *The Thirty Tyrants*, 1.58.

rebellious pretender, especially in such a violent time (though also a prime and politically advantageous example of imperial clemency).[40] Zosimus paints a less peaceful ending to Zenobia's life, explaining that she "died either from disease or by refusing to eat" while marching to Rome as Aurelian's prisoner.[41] However she truly met her end, Zenobia would not rule again after her defeat and capture at the hands of Aurelian.

A Survey of the Surviving Ancient Sources

Though information does survive about the events surrounding Palmyra's brief independence, none of the sources is without faults. Historical writing in the Roman Empire had reached a low point during the third century, and very few contemporary sources survive to the modern day. The dearth of primary sources has several reasons, including the danger and uncertainty of the era, the external threats facing the empire, the failure of subsequent writers to preserve and record the sources, and most importantly, the general decline of historical writing in the period. Historical writing had shifted in focus since the beginning of the century. Starting with the reign of Emperor Commodus and continuing through the third century, Latin writing began to shift from history to biography, documenting the lives of mainly Emperors, along with leading figures of the day. They focus mostly on Romans at the center of political power, neglecting the histories of Rome's peripheral territories. Furthermore, it appears that the perceived quality of the works that were recorded also declined during this time. While a tradition of biographical writing was set forth by Suetonius and Tacitus, whose works were saved and emulated thereafter, there are very few surviving accounts from the third century and beyond. Not only were there apparently few chroniclers, but later authors did not see them fit to cite or record afterward, leading to the

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[40] Historia Augusta, *The Thirty Tyrants*, 30.23-27.
[41] Zos 1.59.

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current dearth of third century Latin writing.[42] Despite the apparent decline in Latin writing, Greek historians continued to carry on the strong Greek tradition of historical writing. Some of the greatest histories of the classical era, including many that describe the rise and history of the Roman Empire, are in fact in Greek, and Greek-speaking Romans were some of the most politically active and powerful figures throughout the history of the Empire. Although their original works do not survive, several Greek writers from the third century heavily influenced surviving writers, and can therefore be useful to understand the events and motivations of the third century actors.

Foremost among these now lost primary authors is Publius Herennius Dexippus, a prominent Athenian statesman and military leader. Dexippus was active throughout the mid-third century, serving as eponymous archon of Athens and leading the ultimately unsuccessful defense of Athens from the third century barbarian Heruli invasion. Dexippus wrote a twelve-book work, *Chronika Historia*, describing the history of the world until the then-present day of 270 AD. The *Chronika* includes an account of the rise and fall of the Palmyrene Empire. Although Dexippus was a contemporary to the events on which he wrote, his work was not without its flaws. Like many other ancient writers, Dexippus was not a historian by trade; in fact, he did not begin writing any of three works until late in his life, well into his retirement. In his elderly state, he was unable to travel or seek out witnesses to the events he described, so he had to rely on scribes and pages to speak with others or find alternate sources.[43] While simply being alive at the same time as the events described would have opened Dexippus up to numerous means of writing a fuller and potentially more accurate historical account, he was held back by certain limitations.

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[42] David Potter, *Prophecy and History in the Crisis of the Roman Empire* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 82-91.
[43] Ibid 82-91.

Unfortunately, Dexippus' *Chronika* survives only as the source of other works, most prominently

Zosimus' sixth century *Historia Nova*.

The only surviving contemporary literary work describing the events of Palmyra in the

third century is the *Thirteenth Sibylline Oracle*, an apocalyptic oracular work of unknown

authorship thought to originate from third century Syria. The oracle is chaotic at best, briefly and

vaguely predicting (or recounting) the major events of the third century. The brief section relevant

to the third century Roman East reads as follows:

> When two war-swift lordly men will rule the mighty Romans, one will show forth
> the number seventy, while the other will be of the third number; and the high-
> necked bull digging the earth with his hoofs and rousing the dust on his double
> horns will do much harm to the dark-hued serpent cutting a furrow with its scales;
> then he will be destroyed. After him again another will come, a well-horned hungry
> stag in the mountains desiring to feed his stomach with the venom-spitting beasts;
> then will come the sun-sent, dreadful, fearful lion, breathing much fire. With great
> and reckless courage he will destroy the well-horned swift stag and the great,
> venom-spitting, fearsome beast discharging many shafts and the bow-footed goat;
> fame will attend him; perfect, unblemished, and awesome, he will rule the Romans
> and the Persians will be feeble.[44]

Do not despair if the relation between the animals of the oracle and our Roman and Palmyrene

players is not immediately clear; metaphor is abundant in the oracle, as an animal or god is

attributed to every emperor and political entity, and though their interactions with one another can

be connected to individuals, oracular writing cannot be an entirely reliable source of information.

The trustworthiness of the *Thirteenth Sibylline Oracle* is further cast into doubt by the uncertainty

surrounding its authorship. While the oracle is attributed to the Sibyls, Roman prophetesses who

relayed the words of the gods, it is clear that the work originated in Northern Syria, and undertones

suggest both Christian and Jewish influence, possibly as original authors or later additions by

translators and scribes. Certain historians, such as Potter in his *Prophecy and History in the Crisis*

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[44] *Thirteenth Sibylline Oracle* 155-171.

of the Roman Empire, suggest that there may have been as many as six separate authors based on the diction and stylistic changes throughout the work.[45]

Despite its setbacks, a true contemporary work from the region in question can be extremely useful to modern historians in understanding the region and its history as well as preserving a local perspective from the time. In fact, the *Thirteenth Sibylline Oracle* is an essential part of confirming the narrative given above. Amidst doubt cast by the facts given in the Historia Augusta and *Historia Nova*, useful information can be gleaned from the oracle's enigmatic message. Some of the metaphors are clear. Persia had traditionally been associated with vipers, especially by Greek writers, so it makes sense that the "venom-spitting beast" represents the Sassanid Persians.[46] The "well-horned hungry stag" who opposes both the serpent and the lion could be the Roman usurper Macrianus, who had first worked with Odenathus to oppose the Sassanids before declaring himself emperor and being defeated by Odenathus.[47] The clearest metaphor is the sun-sent lion, representing Odenathus. Sun-sent because he was dispatched by a chief Palmyrene god, Aglibol, god of the sun, and a lion as the traditional animal of the Syrian Desert, abundant in carvings and reliefs throughout Palmyra itself.[48] In effect, the oracle confirms some of the basic facts which are elaborated upon in the other sources, lending them a measure of credibility.

We are further aided in our modern study by secondary sources which, though not from the exact time in question, were written within centuries of the time and had access to greater resources. As mentioned earlier, Zosimus' sixth century work *Historia Nova* does survive, and it

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[45] Potter, *Prophecy*, 95-139.
[46] Ibid 343.
[47] Ibid 344-345.
[48] Ibid 345-346.

describes the events of third century Syria, including Palmyra's rise and Aurelian's campaigns against it. Zosimus was a Byzantine Greek scholar who lived and wrote in the late fifth and early sixth centuries. He was an outspoken pagan who championed his faith above the still spreading and politically dominant Christian faith of the Byzantine Empire, and he was convinced that a return to ancient Greek paganism would bring about the return of Roman fortunes after the bitter defeats that led to the Western Empire's fall and the Eastern Empire's contraction. Due to this belief, Zosimus was motivated to represent the past actions of the empire, especially during its pagan days, in a particular light, and his personal views can be seen throughout his writing, necessarily qualifying any interpretation of his work.[49] Zosimus apparently detested the Jewish and Christian influences on Palmyra, which by the third century had a significant population of both religious groups in addition to worshippers of the native Palmyrene pantheon, so he is clear in contrasting the duplicitous guile of the Palmyrenes, no doubt a result of the corrupting monotheistic influences on the Palmyrenes, with the upstanding Roman honor of Aurelian.[50] Despite the potential bias, however, Zosimus remains an essential source due both to his close proximity to the events as well as his heavy use of Dexippus' *Chronika*, giving modern authors a glimpse at the detailed contemporary account that cannot be accessed today.

An additional useful surviving secondary source is the Historia Augusta, a likely fourth century collection of biographies of the late Roman Emperors and usurpers. The work describes the tumultuous political situation of the third century emperors, providing details on both the acclaimed emperors in Rome as well as the numerous usurpers who came and went throughout the extended empire. Unfortunately, neither is this work entirely reliable. Numerous details provided

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[49] Ronald T. Ridley, introduction to *Zosimus Historia Nova* (Sydney: Australian Association for Byzantine Studies, 1984), xi-xv.
[50] Zos 1.51.

by the work are known to be false. In one notable example, the Historia Augusta includes a letter apparently written from Egypt by Emperor Hadrian. Hadrian salutes the letter's recipient, Servianus, as consul and also mentions his adopted son Lucius Aelius. The timeline of the letter is impossible, because Hadrian left Egypt in 130 AD, Servianus was made consul in 134 AD, and Hadrian adopted Lucius Aelius in 136 AD, facts all confirmed by multiple external sources.[51] The presence of this and numerous other inconsistencies casts doubt on the reliability of any information provided by the Historia Augusta that cannot be corroborated today. Whether the mistakes were intentional or not is unclear. Any information that is accepted from the work should be understood in the context of the purpose for its writing. The author (or authors – the authorship is similarly disputed) most likely completed the work during or near the reign of Emperor Constantine and his family. Constantine partially derived his right to rule from his relationship with his ancestor Claudius Gothicus, Aurelian's predecessor and one of the third century military emperors. Descriptions of Claudius' actions and the actions of those close to him are glowingly positive, while those of Claudius' enemies are strongly negative. Because Claudius took over the emperorship from Gallienus, the latter's treatment harshly critical, while others who are contrasted with him, especially Odenathus and Zenobia, are presented in a positive manner. The potential partiality brings doubt to the work as a whole, especially when details could be embellished or withheld. Although the limited historical works that survive to this day are not entirely reliable and complete, the multiple works together with archaeological, numismatic, and epigraphical evidence can together create a tenable picture of the events of the day.

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[51] Bill Thayer, Lacus Curtius, accessed May 15, 2016. http://www.livius.org/hi-hn/ha/hist_aug.html.

Conclusion

Armed with a sufficiently reliable understanding of the events that occurred with regard to Palmyra's rebellion, and with the qualifications of the sources known, it is possible to examine in greater depth the motivations behind the events. Zosimus and the author(s) of the Historia Augusta are quick to point out both Odenathus' apparent loyalty to Gallienus and the Roman state as well as Zenobia's arrogance and ambition. What they fail to recount is any of Palmyra's own history, the origins of the city or what its culture valued. Several Palmyrene individuals enter the tale, Odenathus, Zenobia, Vaballathus, and Zabdas, each with their own motivations and personalities, but they do not represent the city's culture as a whole. While much of the city's backstory is not known to modern scholars, surviving evidence, including the events of the third century and coin and statue inscriptions, can help to paint a more complete picture. What they indicate is that Palmyra was unique in its origins, its inhabitants, and its collective beliefs. A streak of independence ran deeply through the city, and while it may not have been apparent to those in power, making decisions on behalf of the city, the tradition of independence clearly affected the course of the city's history. And while to the modern viewer Palmyra may appear ill-suited to seize independence from Rome, in reality its history made it uniquely positioned in the whole Roman Near East to do so. In particular, Palmyra's distinctive economic, military, and cultural history made it possible for the city to briefly but spectacularly succeed in rebelling against Rome.

Chapter 2: Trade and the Lifeblood of the City

Introduction

By the third century AD Palmyra was brimming with wealth. The remote desert city boasted large public buildings, massive temples, and the Grand Colonnade, a kilometer-long street lined by more than 1,500 intricately-carved Corinthian columns, the largest such collection in the entire Roman Near East.[52] All of this overt wealth may seem out of place in an out-of-the-way desert city lacking natural resources or a large population. Where did Palmyra's abundant wealth come from? And how was it related to its eventual rebellion against Rome? Palmyra's economic history is closely related to the ancient caravan trade, and efforts to preserve that trade influenced Palmyra's third century actions during its rebellion.

Palmyra sits at the virtual center of the Syrian Desert (Fig. 6), a vast 200,000 square mile (500,000 square kilometer) arid expanse situated between the Mediterranean Sea and the Euphrates River.[53] The desert itself holds little in terms of resources, besides varied salt flats and minerals in difficult-to-access locations. Most importantly for settlement, however, it is almost entirely devoid of water. The region receives on average less than 5 in (125 mm) of rainfall per year; and most of its land is unable to support any crops or livestock.[54] The geography of the region left it void of economic activity for much of antiquity. Sparsely populated only by nomadic Bedouin tribes, the region saw its surrounding, fertile territory of the Levant coast and the Euphrates river valley fiercely contested by numerous peoples and polities while the central desert itself remained

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[52] "Ruins of the Grand Colonnade of Palmyra," Britannica, accessed May 15, 2016. http://www.britannica.com/place/Palmyra-Syria/images-videos/Ruins-of-the-Grand-Colonnade-Palmyra-Syria/198700
[53] "The Syrian Desert," Encyclopædia Britannica, accessed March 10, 2016. http://www.britannica.com/place/Syrian-Desert
[54] Ibid.

26

Figure 6: Location of Palmyra in the Syrian Desert[55]

uninhabited. Due to the apparent lack of habitable locations and economic activity, Palmyra's second century BC foundation would seem anomalous if not for the one major benefit that the location did have to offer: its oasis. [56]

The oasis of Palmyra likely provided up to 2500 acres (10000 hectares) of arable land to the population that eventually settled there.[57] Archaeological and textual evidence suggests that much of this land was used for date production.[58] The site was further served by a spring, the Efqa spring, which was the primary water source for the residents of the territory until it ran dry in the nineteenth century.[59] In order to use the fresh spring water in the city itself, the Palmyrenes constructed an intricate system of subterranean aqueducts, today called *foggaras* and *qanats*,

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[55] Google Maps, accessed March 13 2016.
[56] Millar, *The Roman Near East*, 320.
[57] "The Syrian Desert."
[58] Andrew M. Smith, *Roman Palmyra – Identity, Community, and State Formation*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2013, 2.
[59] Smith, *Roman Palmyra*, 2.

which could supply the city's wells, fountains, and baths with fresh water and which facilitated

the settlement and growth of the city.[60] The first century AD Roman author and naturalist Pliny

the Elder, who wrote extensively on the natural geography of the Roman Empire, took special note

of Palmyra's uniquely fertile soil, describing it in the following way:

> Palmyra, a city famous for its position, the richness of its soil, and its pleasant
> waters, incorporates fields encircled on all sides by a vast conduit of sand; and, as
> though removed by the natural order for other lands, and enjoying a separate lot
> between two supreme empires, that of the Romans and that of the Parthians, in
> times of discord, it is always the first concern on both sides.[61]

Pliny is quick to point out not only Palmyra's fertile soil but also its distinctive location between

two of the major political powers of the day, the Romans to the west and the Parthians (Persians)

to the east. This location helps to indicate the major reason for Palmyra's existence as an urban

center at all. Its fresh water sources made settlement possible, but its location made it profitable.

Trade between the east and west was both widespread and lucrative. The much-lauded "Silk Road"

is perhaps the best known trade route that connected empires as distant as Rome and China

throughout antiquity; but many similar trade routes existed. Palmyra did not lie along the Silk

Road, which followed the Euphrates River to its north, but it provided a way-station for an alternate

southerly route through the Syrian Desert (Fig. 7).

Water may have been the resource that drew settlers to the area, but the area itself

undoubtedly gave them reason to stay. The central location between two empires and nearby to

ancient urban centers, including the wealthy coastal cities of Egypt, the Levant, and southern

Anatolia, meant that there were sources of and markets for the merchandise transferred through

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[60] J. F. Matthews, "The Tax Law of Palmyra: Evidence for Economic History in a City of the Roman East," *The Journal of Roman Studies* 74 (1984), 157-180.
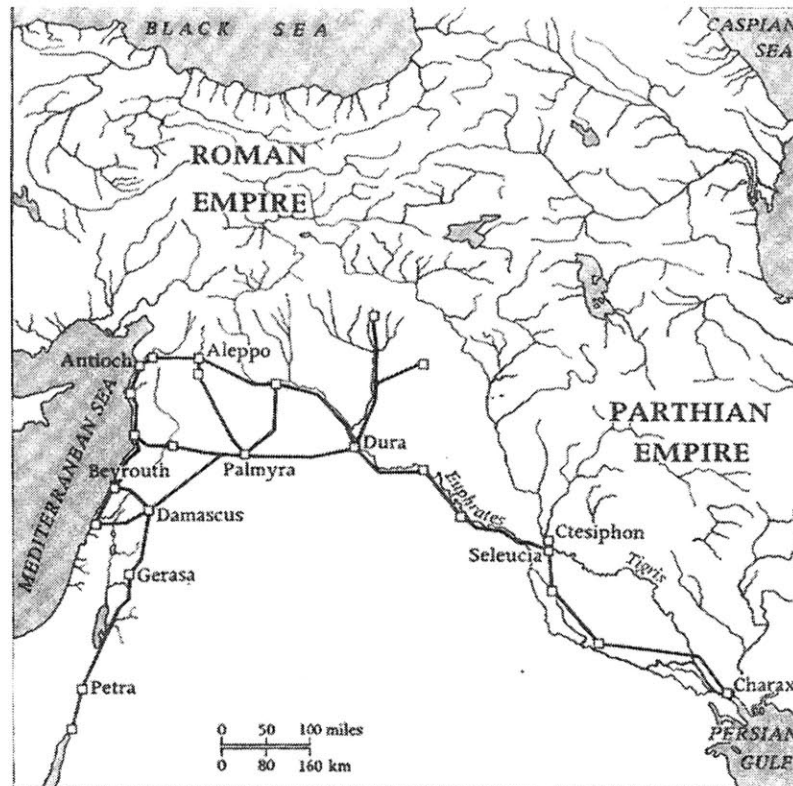[61] Smith, *Roman Palmyra*, 1; Pliny *Historia Naturalis* 5.88.

Figure 7: Palmyra's location along ancient caravan trade routes[62]

the city. Palmyra's settlers capitalized on its location to eventually generate fabulous wealth.

Textual evidence, including references in the Hebrew Bible, indicate that the site of the city was

known as early as the second millennium BC.[63] However, the early population appears to have

been relatively small in size, as there is no archaeological record of settlement before the third

century BC.[64] The area was not heavily urbanized until around the first century AD, when the

archaeological evidence indicates a period of increased urban building began and continued all the

way up to Palmyra's destruction in the third century AD.[65] More building projects follow increased

wealth, so it is likely no coincidence that the period of heavy urbanization occurs in tandem with

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[62] "Palmyra: Trade Center of the Ancient Near East," accessed May 06, 2016. http://www.usc.edu/dept/LAS/arc/ palmyrene/html/Palmyra.html

[63] Millar, *The Roman Near East*, 320-322.

[64] Ibid 320.

[65] The archaeological evidence of urbanization at Palmyra is covered at greater length in Chapter 4 below.

the development and spread of the caravan trade throughout the region, a trade that would propel

Palmyra to its place among the ranks of the wealthiest cities in the ancient world.

Palmyra and the Caravan Trade

Figure 8: Caravan composed of camels transporting goods through a desert[66]

Caravans (an example of which is shown in Fig. 8) are long-distance trade groups that

travel together for safety and convenience, transporting goods to distant markets. They were

operated extensively in ancient times, connecting eastern and western markets to trade goods

between the two. The best documented caravan route, the Silk Road, ran from China to

Constantinople and generated enormous wealth along the entirety of its path.[67] It mainly operated

by transporting luxury goods, notably its eponymous silk, but also spices, incense, and dyes.[68]

While Palmyra did participate in caravan trade, it did not lie on the Silk Road. Instead, Palmyra's

unique position and water resources provided an alternate route (Fig. 7) for caravans to traverse

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[66] "Follow the Caravan," accessed May 17, 2016. http://wegoro.com/follow-the-caravan-that-goes-on/
[67] Millar, *The Roman Near East*, 15-16.
[68] Ibid 322, 330.

through the Syrian Desert. After a stop at Palmyra to rest and resupply (and of course after paying

a small fee to the Palmyrene authorities), the caravans could continue on to their destinations.

Figure 9: Surviving stones from the Tax Law of Palmyra[69]

Much of what is known about the details of Palmyra's participation in the caravan trade

comes from surviving inscriptions. One of the most important is the Tax Law of Palmyra, a

collection of four large carved stones (Fig. 9), written in two languages, Greek and Palmyrene, and

dating to the year 137 AD, which detail how taxes were levied for various goods moving through

the city.[70] The fact that such an inscription exists, an inscription without parallel in any nearby

cities, already demonstrates the important nature of Palmyra's participation in the caravan trade.

It begins with an introduction and decree from the council that approved the tax law, which reads

as follows:

> It was decreed as follows: Since in former times most of the dues were not set down
> in the tax law but were exacted by convention, it being written into the contract that
> the tax collector should make his exactions in accordance with the law and with
> custom, and it frequently happened that disputes arose on this matter between the
> merchants and the tax collectors, it is resolved that the magistrates in office and the
> *dekaprotoi* [board of municipal officials] should determine the dues not set down
> in the law and write them into the next contract, and assign to each class of goods

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[69] "The Tax Law of Palmyra," accessed 10 April 2016. http://4.bp.blogspot.com/_RN2XNr6CWF8/Rga1Wr4ll9I/
AAAAAAAAAHM/zv74tKbdoI8/s400/PalmTarif2-copy.jpg.
[70] Matthews, "Tax Law of Palmyra," 157-180.

the tax laid down by custom... and the magistrates who are in office at any time...
should take care to see that the contractor does not exact any excess charge.[71]

The tax law is then laid out, standardizing the tolls to be exacted for different types of goods that

traffic through the city. An excerpt of the law is given below.[72]

For a load of olive oil imported by camel in two goatskins,	
he will exact	[?7] den.
Exported	7 den.
For a loaf of olive oil imported by donkey, he will exact	7 den.
Exported,	[7] den.
For a load of animal fat imported by camel in four goatskins	
he will exact	13 den.
Exported,	13 den.
...For a load of salt fish imported by camel, he will exact	10 den.

The tax law speaks of levies to be paid for olive oil, salt fish, animal fat, wheat, wine, and fodder,

all of which are trade goods purchased by large segments of the population, not merely the

wealthy.[73] Furthermore, many of the measurements to calculate the taxes are taken by goatskin,

which unlike more expensive clay or alabaster pottery was the transport vessel of the common

people of the ancient Mediterranean world.[74] Palmyra's prosaic trade goods may lack the exotic

nature of the silk and spices of the Silk Road, but their importance to the lives of their consumers

must be recognized. The heavily urbanized Roman Empire was constantly under pressure to feed

its population, and often the food produced in the empire itself could not meet the demand. Trade

goods brought from the east were consumed throughout the Roman Empire, and whenever they

moved through Palmyra, they generated more wealth for the city.[75]

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[71] Ibid 175-176.
[72] Ibid 174.
[73] Matthews, "Tax Law of Palmyra," 172-175.
[74] Ibid 168.
[75] Smith, Roman Palmyra, 75.

In addition to the Tax Law, further inscriptions help to accentuate the importance of the caravan trade to Palmyra's economy and very reason for existing. The inscriptions of Palmyra include both the Tax Law, an inscription of public interest, as well as personal inscriptions which honor individuals and groups that performed notable deeds. The earliest inscription in Palmyra dates to the year 44 BC, and it records the erection of a statue of the god Bel on the site of the Great Temple of Bel.[76] Other inscriptions dedicate similar statues or temples or provide accounts of martial deeds, but the most common inscriptions are those which discuss the caravan trade.

The caravan trade was highly valuable to the Palmyrenes, and the praise that the city's most prominent businessmen received clearly demonstrates how they were considered extraordinary citizens. One such individual, Marcus Ulpius Yarhai, received three separate inscriptional honors, as well as a public statue in Palmyra's *agora*, between 156 and 159 AD.[77] He was further honored by another inscription, written in the Palmyrene language, located in the Persian city of Choumana.[78] His wealth and service to the city were recognized by its native inhabitants as well as those Palmyrene agents operating in other cities along the major trade routes. An earlier inscription, written in 86 AD and dedicated to another Yarhai of uncertain relation, commends the man "for benevolence and attentiveness to the merchants."[79] This particular inscription reads in both Palmyrene and Greek, and its location in the *agora* suggests that the man honored was an official in the market, so the bilingual inscription meant to proclaim his good work to all of the city's visiting merchants.[80] In the year 138 AD the council of Palmyra honored a certain Yarhibôlâ with a statue for "having assisted merchants from Spasinou Charax," a Parthian port city in the

[76] Millar, *The Roman Near East*, 321.
[77] Smith, *Roman Palmyra*, 77.
[78] Ibid 77.
[79] Ibid 78.
[80] Ibid 78.

Persian Gulf.[81] Most of the inscriptions in the city's public places appear to have been privately funded, but the prevalence of state-appointed public honors reflects the nature of the caravan trade on the city's psyche. If so much of its public space was devoted to honoring the men of the caravan trade, no Palmyrene resident could forget the trade's impact on their city. The impact was widespread, even affecting those Palmyrenes living outside of the city itself.

Palmyra's population was divided among three groups, urban dwellers living in the city itself, pastoralists raising animals along the city's outskirts, and nomads, particularly Bedouins, who moved in and out of the city and its greater territory to conduct trade.[82] Each of these groups played a role in facilitating the operation of caravans through the city, with the urban population trading and warehousing goods while the pastoralists maintained the animals necessary for the trade and the nomads participated in the movement of the goods themselves. According to Gowlikowski's 1995 study of Syrian population trends, when Palmyra's population increased in the first century AD, the Arab component of the city's residents increased more than any other ethnic group.[83] Such an increase can be attributed to the greater flux of caravan groups through the city, which required experienced animal handlers to see to the camels and horses. None were more adept at the task than the Arab nomads, whose movement to the city helps to further highlight the growing wealth and prestige that the city possessed, and the specific dependence of that wealth and prestige on the caravan economy.

Though Palmyra lay along an important route for caravan traffic, it was not the only city along the route. Many other cities grew wealthy from the trade as well. What makes Palmyra unique is the impact of that trade on the city itself. While other cities along the caravan routes had

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[81] Ibid 78.
[82] Ibid 74.
[83] M. Gowlikowski, as cited in Smith, *Roman Palmyra*, 72.

existed for thousands of years (the Fertile Crescent is, after all, the home to the world's oldest cities), Palmyra owed its very existence to that trade. The reliance on trade is reflected in the power structures within the city. The political entities of the ancient world were largely agrarian, and for the most part power was attributed to the ownership of land, not monetary, wealth.[84] And while the land did serve to generate wealth, it also generated a prestige not equaled by the mere control of wealth without land. Indeed, in ancient Rome trade was looked down upon. Jones noted that "trade and industry were occupations left to foreigners, freedmen, and the lower orders," not to be carried out by respectable citizens.[85] Powerful Romans in most of the empire would cite their ownership of land, not possession of vast wealth, as the reason for their elevated positions. In contrast, the desert city of Palmyra took a starkly different view. Land was readily available, and its ownership meant very little to the residents of the city.[86] It was the wealth of the caravan trade that made the city possible, therefore it was that wealth that was valued most highly. The numerous inscriptions lauding leaders of the caravan trade verify this interpretation of Palmyrene sensibilities toward traders, extolling them for their service to the city.

The Palmyrene Diaspora

Palmyra's mercantile activities led to the city's wealth and prestige, but they extended beyond the city's borders, and even past the great expanse of the Syrian Desert. Palmyrene merchants could be found in cities stretching from the British Isles to the Indian subcontinent, not only moving through with their merchandise but also making semi-permanent bases to house and resupply the passing merchants.[87] Smith describes the "Palmyrene diaspora" as the distribution of

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[84] A. H. M. Jones, as cited in Matthews, "Tax Law of Palmyra," 170.
[85] Ibid 170.
[86] Ibid 170-171.
[87] Smith, *Roman Palmyra*, 160.

Palmyrenes who lived in other cities but continued to speak the Palmyrene language, worship the Palmyrene gods, and support the Palmyrene caravan trade.[88] The city with the largest population of Palmyrene expatriates was Dura-Europos, a city on the Euphrates river founded by Greeks, conquered by Parthians and later Sassanids, but also contested by Romans throughout its complex history (see Fig. 7 above).[89] Palmyrene presence in Dura began as early as 33 BC, not long after the city of Palmyra began to expand, when two Palmyrenes, Zabdibol and Malku, founded a sanctuary for the Palmyrene gods Bel and Yarhibol outside of the city walls, remains of which still survive today.[90] The Palmyrene enclave grew to include traders, soldiers, and priests, who lived hundreds of miles away from Palmyra, all the while maintaining their distinct Palmyrene heritage.[91] The soldiers were led by a *strategos*, general, appointed by the city government of Palmyra, evidenced by inscriptions in 168 and 171 AD naming Atpanai and Zēnobios, respectively, to that position.[92] The Palmyrene enclave in Dura survived for three centuries, evidencing the importance of the city on Palmyra's trade route and the importance of the trade route to Palmyra's economy and its very existence.

Limited evidence survives of other Palmyrene settlements throughout the ancient world. Palmyrene inscriptions in Ctesiphon, the Persian capital which would later be twice besieged by Odenathus, have been found and dated to 19 AD; similar inscriptions in Babylon date back to 24 AD.[93] Palmyrene reach extended to Egypt as well. An inscription in the Red Sea port city of Coptos reads as follows:

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[88] Ibid 161.
[89] Ibid 151.
[90] Ibid 151.
[91] Ibid 152.
[92] Ibid 153.
[93] Ibid 162.

> Zabdalas, son of Salmanos, (also called?) Aneinas, of the Hadrian Palmyrene
> sailors of the Red Sea, (who?) set up, fresh from the foundations, the *propylaea,*
> the three *stoas,* and the *atria,* all from his own funds, for his friendship and
> distinction, the Hadrian Palmyrenes, his companions, (honor) their friend.[94]

Zabdalas appears to have been a pillar of his community, establishing public spaces in a city not even his own. The building housing this inscription appears to have been a *collegium,* a sort of cross between a sports club and a religious meeting place, which could host passing merchants and boasted its own archery defense corps.[95] Further Palmyrene inscriptions survive in Vologaesias, Seleucia, and Hit.[96] The center of balance of the Palmyrene diaspora leans to Palmyra's east and southwest, perhaps owning to Palmyra's shared heritage with Hellenistic Egypt, Persia, and Babylonia. Yet it is still important to note how widespread it is. The distribution of Palmyrenes far from the city itself appears to have been for the sole purpose of supporting Palmyra's caravan trade, further demonstrating the essential nature of that trade to the city and its inhabitants and expatriates as well as the importance of wider regional stability to maintain that all-important trade and the profits which it brought to the city.

Conclusion

Palmyra undoubtedly grew wealthy from the trade passing through it. What marks Palmyra as unique among not only the cities along the trade routes but also among cities in the Roman world was the perspective on trade held by the city's collective conscious. Successful traders were hailed alongside military commanders and religious leaders. Beautiful public monuments constructed in the city were conspicuously financed by and dedicated to men whose wealth came from the caravan trade. The caravan trade permeated all parts of the city and the lives of its

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[94] Ibid 162; A. Bernand, "Les portes du desert," *Dialogues d'historie ancienne* 11, 262-263, pl. 62, no. 103.
[95] Smith, *Roman Palmyra,* 162.
[96] Millar, *The Roman Near East,* 330.

residents, and because of that it assumed a central role in the operation of the city. Unfortunately for those residents, the trade was at the mercy of political forces surrounding the city. A large numbers of inscriptions documenting successful trading missions come from the period between 131 and 161 AD, a period which not by chance coincides with a period of peace between Rome and Parthia. The number of inscriptions between 161 and 193 AD, the time of Marcus Aurelius' and Septimius Severus' invasions of Parthia, sharply falls to almost zero.[97] The caravan trade, and therefore Palmyra's wealth and prestige, was dependent on a peaceful surrounding region.

The events of the third century can now be examined more closely given the context of Palmyra's caravan trade. The importance of unhindered trade to the city's economy must have instilled a desire on the part of the city's leaders to preserve the safe passage of the caravans. It appears that the renewed aggression of the Sassanid Empire cut into the profits of Palmyra's merchants, potentially evidenced by a decrease in inscriptions in the 250's and 260's AD.[98] The Roman government was proving itself unable to defend its frontiers, and Palmyra was suffering economically as a result. Although Odenathus restored the security of the region before his death, confidence in the Roman cause could not have been high in the Palmyrene court. Therefore, when Zenobia and her advisors inherited a thriving city, attached to a weakened empire, but in possession of a powerful army (as we shall see in the following chapter), the decision to strike out for independence does not seem so far-fetched. Many of the final destinations of the Palmyrene caravans were cities in the Roman Near East anyway, so if those cities were under Palmyrene control, the trade could continue unhindered.[99] Palmyra was extremely dependent on the caravan trade, and with it under threat, a viable option which the city's government pursued appears to

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[97] Smith, *Roman Palmyra*, 78.
[98] Ibid 78-79.
[99] Matthews, "Tax Law of Palmyra," 163-165.

have been independence. Palmyra's unique economic situation and reliance on the caravan trade

of the Near East put it in a position to take action to defend that trade, and contributed to its failed

independence movement.

Chapter 3: Palmyra's Military and the Legions of the East

Introduction

Palmyra had established itself as a wealthy and prosperous city by becoming an essential part of the caravan trade through the Near East. But its wealth and prestige were not sufficient to give the city the ability to rebel against Rome in the third century AD. It would require a military that could rival that of the most powerful empire the world had ever seen. The Roman Empire of the third century was in disarray, but could still muster sufficient strength to turn back invaders on three continents for two centuries longer. How, then, did tiny Palmyra manage to secure its conquests? In this chapter I will examine the nature and purpose of the Palmyrene military.

After Emperor Valerian's 260 AD defeat at Edessa, the major Roman army of the East was shattered, and for two years the Sassanids had free reign to harry and raid the cities of the Roman Near East.[100] The scourge was not ended until Odenathus, Lord of Palmyra, united the disparate Roman survivors with his own considerable army and decisively routed the Persians, even besieging their capital of Ctesiphon twice.[101] Zosimus tells of the military successes of Odenathus, explaining that

> "Odenathus, the Palmyrene, a man highly esteemed because of the honor the emperors had shown to his ancestors... joined the largest possible force of his own men to the legions which remained in the East and vigorously attacked [King] Sapor, recapturing the cities already possessed by the Persians. Nisibis, which had been taken by Sapor and was pro-Persian, he overwhelmed and razed to the ground. Then pursuing them as far as Ctesiphon, not once but twice he shut the Persians up in their own city..."[102]

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[100] Potter, *The Roman Empire at Bay*, 256.
[101] Ibid 259.
[102] Zos 1.39.

Yet from where did this army materialize in the wake of the Roman disaster at Edessa? Who exactly were Odenathus' "own men"? Why did the Roman "legions which remained in the East" choose to join Odenathus, a Palmyrene general? And how could Zenobia later use this army to exert Palmyrene influence throughout the Near East? In order to understand the events of Palmyra's short-lived empire, we must carefully examine the background of its armed forces.

Conflict with Palmyra's Nomadic Neighbors

As with Palmyra's economic history, so its military history was inextricably linked to the caravan trade. The Syrian Desert could be a dangerous place for travelers. Numerous Greek and Roman authors, including Strabo in the early first century AD and Ulpian in the early third century AD, record conflicts between the nomadic Bedouin Arab tribes living in the desert and the settled peoples surrounding it. Ulpian, writing about Palmyra's promotion to *colonia* status in 214 AD, spoke of the city as "located next to the barbarian *gentes* and *nationes*." He depicts the Arabs as "barbarians" and places them on the same level as the Germanic tribes typically associated with that term, all the while indicating that although their territory was nominally incorporated into the Roman Empire, in practice the nomadic Arab *gentes* and *nationes*, "nations," operated independently.[103] Their interactions with the urban population at Palmyra could be alternately symbiotic or belligerent. Bedouin Arabs supplied and kept many of the animals utilized by the caravan traders, and they lent their considerable experience with desert travel to benefit the trade passing through the region.[104] Nonetheless, they could also threaten the safe travel of the caravans through the desert.

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[103] Ulpian, *Digest*, L, 15, 1, 5; Strabo, *Geographica*, XVI, 1, 27.
[104] Smith, *Roman Palmyra*, 73-75.

Besides the brief mentions of nomadic steppe "barbarians" in the textual sources, much of the information that is known today about the threats posed by marauding Arab tribesmen throughout the Syrian Desert comes from the epigraphical remains. Many of the inscriptions that survive in Palmyra are public announcements lauding individuals for their protection of caravans. An inscription from 199 AD states that the city council granted honors to an individual, Ogeîlû, who carried out multiple successful campaigns against hostile nomadic groups.[105] An inscription dating to 188 AD honors "the detachment of Ana and of Gamela," horsemen who were apparently successful in combating threats to Palmyra's trade.[106] In perhaps the most interesting case that spans the longest amount of time, a certain Palmyrene, Soados, is twice honored in inscriptions dating to 132 and 144 AD. In the former, he is said to have saved a caravan from an unspecified marauder threat to it. In the latter, he is praised for assembling a large force to track down and kill a bandit leader, Abdallat, who had been terrorizing caravans passing through Palmyrene territory. What is particularly interesting in the second inscription is the amount of uncertainty surrounding Soados' force. It is possible that he was the leader of a military force raised on behalf of the city to patrol its borders and hinterland. It is also possible that Soados was a wealthy individual who raised a private army at his own expense to protect caravans, presumably his own, that were threatened by the lawlessness of Abdallat and the Syrian Desert tribes. Other surviving inscriptions reference both types of military ventures, which will be discussed in greater depth below, but Soados' force is not clarified.[107] While the nature of Soados' force is unknown, what is apparent is that the Palmyrenes recognized the threats posed by the hostile tribes and bandit groups surrounding their city and took measures to combat them. The quantity of surviving sources

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[105] Ibid 144.
[106] Ibid 145.
[107] Millar, *The Roman Near East*, 333-336.

regarding the importance of protecting caravans clearly demonstrates the magnitude of the threat posed by banditry in the desert. As the previous chapter demonstrated, the caravan trade was the lifeblood of the city of Palmyra, the reason for its existence and the cause of its opulence. Threats to the safe conduct of that trade were taken seriously.

Organization of Palmyra's Military Operations

There were numerous methods by which the Palmyrenes protected their traders. Two distinct groups appear to have existed to serve that purpose. Safety was maintained by both a government-led military force as well as by private security forces. Palmyra clearly held a unique position in the Roman Empire, not only in gaining its status as a *colonia* despite its distant relationship with central Roman authority. Its strategic location as the major urban center of the Syrian Desert, in the midst of the borderland between Rome and Persia, made it even more important to the Romans. Likely for that reason, Palmyra was given permission to patrol the desert and garrison its own outposts independently of the Roman military.[108] In the year 17 AD, the Roman *legatus* of Syria, Creticus Silanus, defined and recorded Palmyra's boundaries in an inscription, giving the city jurisdiction over much of the desert to its south, east, and west.[109] In this territory, the Palmyrenes were free to operate their forces to protect their economic, and by extension Rome's strategic, interests. Palmyrene inscriptions and archaeological evidence throughout the Syrian Desert, including several Palmyrene-language grave sites near the Euphrates River, suggest that a Palmyrene military force was present in the region, maintaining defense posts and carrying out operations against hostile Arabs throughout the first-third centuries AD.[110]

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[108] Smith, *Roman Palmyra*, 145.
[109] Ibid 146.
[110] Millar, *The Roman Near East*, 333.

While it is apparent that the Palmyrenes were permitted to operate an independent city-led military force, it is uncertain to what extent they did so. The inscriptions which praise the defense of caravans may refer to a Palmyrene city military force or to private forces raised by the individuals praised. There is also no mention of any Palmyrene military leaders, besides the apparently quasi-independent Palmyrene individuals honored in inscriptions; "quasi-independent" because the individuals clearly performed a type of public work for the city, but were apparently free to do so, raising military forces at their own expense, without government oversight. Even under Odenathus during his successful campaigns against the Persians, no Palmyrene military leaders are mentioned until the 260's AD, when suddenly two men, Septimius Zabdas and Septimius Zabbai, emerge as Zenobia's hitherto-unmentioned generals.[111] Furthermore, the posts which were maintained along the routes in the desert may have been independently Palmyrene, manned exclusively by Palmyrenes and for the sole purpose of protecting the caravans, or could have contained Roman contingents as well, performing a more widespread garrison duty to protect the whole of the frontier instead of merely the trading interests of one city. The scope of the Palmyrene military remains murky. What is clear, however, is its purpose: to protect the all-important Palmyrene caravans.

Despite the uncertain nature of the standing Palmyrene army, it is apparent that there was some sort of permanent military presence throughout Palmyrene territory. In addition to the city-led military force, private individuals also raised and financed their own military forces to patrol the caravan routes. Some of the above mentioned inscriptions likely refer to these privately-led caravan guards, who probably served on a temporary basis, either responding to particular threats

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[111] Ibid 334.

or guarding individual caravans.[112] What remains uncertain is whether they were always employed at private expense, if they were publicly funded, or if a combination of the two systems was used. The inscriptions lauding individual actions suggest that they may have been private ventures; however, it is also possible that Soados, Ogeîlû, and their companions were the city-appointed leaders of publicly sponsored ventures who were praised for their military successes, not necessarily for their largesse. Whether the military forces were public or private, however, the evidence is consistent in noting the availability of manpower in the city for policing and caravan guard duties.

Palmyrene Service in the Roman Military

The above evidence makes it clear that the Palmyrenes relied on various fighting forces to continue the caravan trade and maintain economic prosperity. Further evidence of the activities of Palmyrenes far away from their city supports the idea of a Palmyrene "martial culture," a notion that the city was not merely made up of traders, but that the city's trading background developed concurrently with a tradition of providing security in the form of well-trained military contingents. Throughout Palmyra's time as part of the Roman Empire, large numbers of native Palmyrenes served in Rome's armed forces as auxiliaries, as of course did most other allied and subject peoples. In particular, Palmyra was famed for the skill of its archers. Eight thousand Palmyrene archers, a significant auxiliary contingent, had served with Vespasian during his conquest of Judea, and later his invasion of Italy, in 69 AD.[113] The *strategos* of the archers appears to have been a position of considerable renown, with statues and inscriptions dedicated to and by the holder of

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[112] Smith, *Roman Palmyra*, 144.
[113] Richard Stoneman, *Palmyra and its Empire: Zenobia's Revolt Against Rome* (Anne Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 28.

that position being present in both Palmyra and Dura-Europos.[114] Roman records from Dura-Europos report that the Palmyrene garrison of the city was reorganized into the Roman military as the auxiliary *cohors XX Palmyrenorum*, a unit of foot and camel archers that remained active until at least 257 AD, after which point no records mention it again.[115] Evidence of Palmyrene auxiliary units indicates Palmyrene service in Roman units in provinces as far-flung as Britain, Numidia, and Dacia.[116] A grave marker in the north of Britain was erected by a Palmyrene auxiliary, Barates, for his Briton wife Regina. The epithet is written in Latin, but with a Palmyrene addendum.[117] A carving found on Hadrian's Wall in northern England shows a Palmyrene archer with a distinct hat and bow shape (Fig. 10). Grave markers also exist in Numidia and Dacia honoring fallen
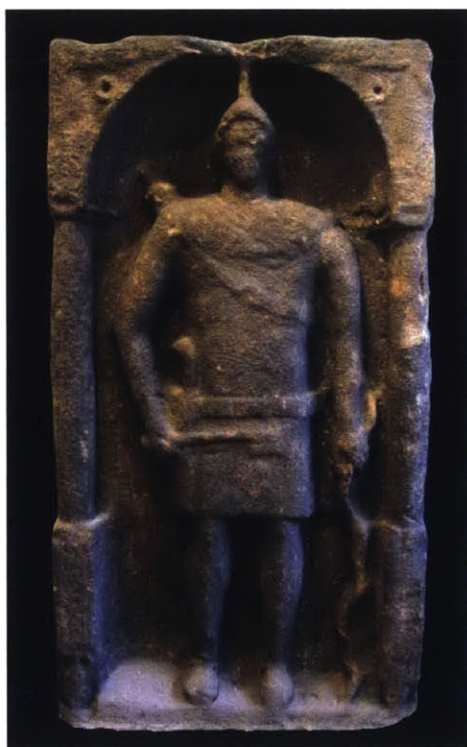

Figure 10: Palmyrene archer represented on Hadrian's Wall in Britain. Note the distinct hat and bow shapes[118]

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[114] Smith, *Roman Palmyra*, 159-163.
[115] Ibid 153.
[116] Millar, *The Roman Near East*, 328
[117] Ibid 328.
[118] "Syrian Archers on Hadrian's Wall, accessed May 12, 2016. https://rememberingromans.wordpress.com/2016/04/03/syrian-archers-on-hadrians-wall/.

Palmyrenes.[119] A bilingual Palmyrene and Latin inscription in the agora of the Dacian city of Porolissium honors the "*eparchos* of the archers of Upper Dacia," and a discharge-diploma, dated to 120 AD and granted to a Palmyrene soldier by the name of Hamasaeus, was uncovered in the same city.[120] In all the above cases of reference to Palmyrene units in the Roman Army, the Palmyrenes are indicated as operating in archer units.[121] Their service in the Roman Army demonstrates not only their skill at arms, skills likely honed while patrolling their own borders at home, but also their connection to the overall Roman government which ruled over them, a connection that would apparently be severed when Palmyra eventually rebelled against Rome.

Military Organization of Rome's Eastern Frontier

In addition to the various, apparently city-led and Palmyrene military forces, the forces which likely comprised Odenathus' "own men" referenced by Zosimus, there was also a sustained Roman military presence in the city, a likely basis for the "legions which remained in the East." There was already a network of permanent legionary bases throughout the Roman Near East by the second century AD (Fig. 11). These legions, Rome's elite heavy infantry forces, formed the backbone of the Roman standing military forces around the Mediterranean. They were known to be some of the best fighting forces in the world; as heavy infantry forces, however, they were slow to move and could not quickly respond to threats. Thus, they were ill-suited to defend against the threats to Palmyra, fast-moving bandits and desert nomads, and as a result Palmyra was not home to a permanent legionary garrison.

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[119] Millar, *The Roman Near East*, 328.
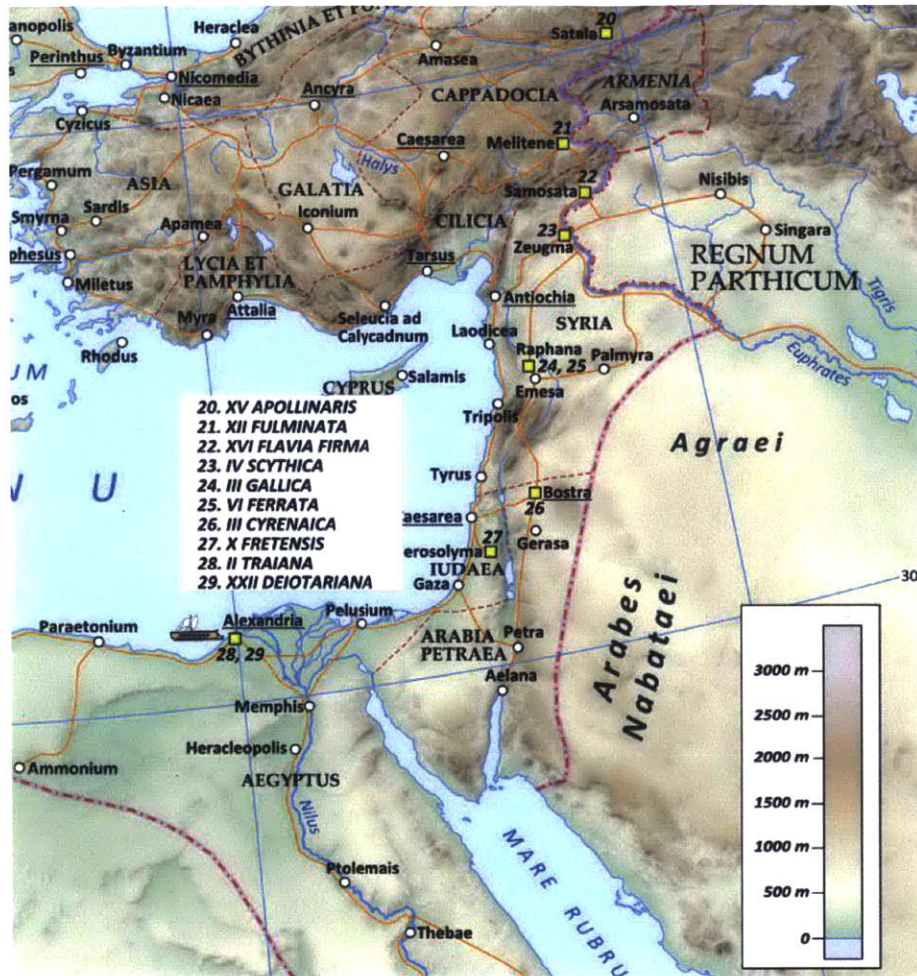[120] Ibid 334.
[121] Ibid 328.

Figure 11: Roman legionary bases in the second century AD[122]

The importance of Palmyra's position as a border city between the Roman and Persian Empires was not lost on the Romans. The Romans were keen to ensure that the border with first the Parthian and later the Sassanid Empire, separately the only organized states directly bordering the Roman Empire, was well-manned. Furthermore, the border between the two powers was particularly porous and difficult to defend. The Syrian Desert is a vast, dry expanse, so permanent garrisons are difficult to maintain without constant supply deliveries. There are few natural barriers, without rivers or mountain ranges, so there is no ideal place to station static defenses. To

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[122] "Maps of the Roman Empire in 125 AD," accessed May 8, 2016. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Maps_of_the_Roman_Empire_in_125_AD

complicate matters more, the large size of the area made patrolling the entire border even more difficult. Given the challenging geography of the region, it is understandable that the Romans implemented a defense system that attempted to make the most of the inhospitable area. Millar posits that the structure of the Roman organization of their eastern frontier was not to establish a series of static defenses, like Hadrian's Wall in Britain or the border forts along the German frontier, but instead to maintain secure routes of communication that could allow for rapid deployment of more mobile defense forces along the entire length of the eastern frontier.[123] In this context of safe communication and travel, the Roman approach to their eastern border went hand-in-hand with the Palmyrenes' own goals of securing their caravan trade routes.

In the mid-second century AD the Romans based at least one cavalry *ala* unit in the city.[124] The cavalry *ala* was the Roman Empire's elite cavalry corps. Heavily armed and highly-mobile, the units were usually utilized as escorts for the legions, the backbone of Rome's army for most of its history. In general Rome did not invest heavily in cavalry forces, and most of Rome's military tactics centered on the use of the legions. It is therefore notable that the Romans committed an entire *ala* to be permanently stationed in Palmyra, a testament to the importance of its position and to the need for a mobile force to respond to threats from the desert rapidly. In the third century AD the *ala* was replaced by a mounted cohort, a smaller auxiliary unit, perhaps as a result of mounting threats elsewhere in the Empire. The cohort, *cohors I Flavia Chalcidenorum*, was composed of Bithynian cavalry famed for their mobility, a necessary skill for service in the Syrian Desert.[125] This unit appears to have remained stationed in Palmyra throughout the third century, possibly participating in the climactic Battle of Edessa in 260 AD.

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[123] Millar, *The Roman Near East*, 127-141.
[124] Smith, *Roman Palmyra*, 146.
[125] Ibid 146.

Rome's permanent military presence augmented the native Palmyrene forces, but likely served a different overall purpose, forward-deployed as a deterrent against Persian aggression in addition to its role in preventing marauding that threatened the caravan trade. The evidence provided by textual, epigraphical, and archaeological remains sheds light on the various military activities relevant to Palmyra. It is therefore clear that Palmyra was a center of military activity, though that activity was varied and diverse. The Roman Empire recognized the importance of the city and had a vested interest in maintaining its safety and the security of the lucrative caravan trade passing through it. For this reason, and to remind the nearby Persians of the capabilities of Rome, there was a permanent Roman cavalry force from the mid-second century based in the city. The city itself maintained a standing garrison, and throughout the second and third centuries also sustained garrisons at posts throughout the Syrian Desert, although there are scant details about the size, composition, or nature of these permanent forces. There were also temporary, private guards that were raised to defend caravans and stamp out banditry in the desert. While these caravan guards may not have been permanent military forces, it is clear that they were able to be raised quickly to respond to threats. Palmyra in this sense can be compared to the fictional Mos Eisley cantina on Tatooine, a place where people of multiple different races, speaking many languages, congregated, and a traveler could easily find armed men to help with whatever task they had, whether escorting a caravan through the desert or traveling quickly to Alderaan. So when Odenathus found his city vulnerable to Persian raiding in 260 AD, he had numerous military forces from which to draw to assemble his army. When combined with the remaining Roman forces in the region, this created a formidable force from which even the resurgent Sassanians quivered.

<u>Palmyra's Military in Zenobia's Revolt</u>

It is at this point that we move from the aftermath of Edessa in 260 AD and to the period

of Zenobia, during which Palmyra is described as asserting itself more aggressively and

establishing an extensive territorial dominance, which later historians would come to call "the

Palmyrene Empire." The Historia Augusta does not discuss the military events of the time, only

biographies of the key players, and the *Thirteenth Sibylline Oracle* does not seem to "predict" any

events after Odenathus' early victories, so we must rely entirely on Zosimus and the epigraphical

evidence to glean information about Palmyra's campaigns. When Odenathus died in 267 AD, he

left behind a cohesive and veteran army made up of "the largest possible force" of his own

Palmyrene troops augmented by the "legions which remained in the east" after Valerian's defeat

in 260 AD.[126] Zosimus tells of what happened next, explaining that,

> Zenobia now became ambitious, and sent [Septimius] Zabdas [her general] to Egypt because Timagenes, an Egyptian who was working to hand Egypt over to the Palmyrenes, had raised an army of seventy thousand Palmyrenes, Syrians and barbarians, against whom were ranged fifty thousand Egyptians. In a fierce battle the Palmyrenes won a decisive victory and, after setting up a garrison of five thousand men, marched away. When [Tenagino] Probus [the Roman *praefectus* of Egypt]... learned that Egypt was held by the Palmyrenes, he attacked the garrison with his own troops and all the Egyptians who opposed the Palmyrenes, and expelled it. When the Palmyrenes mounted a fresh campaign, Probus assembled an army of Egyptians and Africans. These were not only victorious but also drove the Palmyrenes right out of Egypt. Probus occupied a mountain near Babylon [an Egyptian fortress] to cut off the enemy's escape into Syria, but Timagenes, who was familiar with the area, gained the summit with two thousand Palmyrenes and surprised and killed the Egyptians... Egypt was now in the hands of the Palmyrenes.[127]

According to Zosimus' account of the battle, Zenobia's general Septimius Zabdas was able to

assemble seventy thousand troops to campaign on Palmyra's behalf. Zosimus only references the

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[126] Zos 1.39.
[127] Ibid 1.44-45.

Palmyrene, Syrian, and "barbarian," likely Bedouin or Arab, components of the Palmyrene army, making no mention of any "legions which remained in the east" as composing the army. It may be that in the ten years after the Battle of Edessa all of the surviving Roman contingents had returned home. However, it is also possible that Zosimus, in his quest to discredit the Palmyrenes, who opposed his beloved pagan Romans, sought to highlight their "foreignness." It seems most likely, though, that the lack of mention of any legions indicates that the Roman military presence at the time had vanished, and the battles being waged were done with fresh troops raised locally. If this is the case, then Palmyra held a distinct military advantage, with its large corps of Odenathus' veterans and experienced caravan guards making up its military.

Zosimus does not discuss Palmyra's military activities again until Aurelian's eventual invasion. At that time,

> The emperor decided to lead an expedition against Palmyra, which controlled all Egypt and the East as far as Ancyra in Galatia; she [Zenobia] would also have liked to take over Bithynia as far as Chalcedon, had the Bithynians not heard of Aurelian's elevation and shaken off Palmyrene control. With the advance of the emperor's army, Ancyra, Tyana, and all the cities between it and Antioch submitted to the Romans. In the last, Aurelian found Zenobia well prepared with a large army, and since he was also prepared for battle, he advanced to engage her as honor obliged him. Seeing, however, that the Palmyrene cavalry felt very confident of its heavy, strong armor and also greatly surpassed his own horsemanship, he set his infantry apart somewhere over the Orontes river, and ordered the Roman horse not to engage the fresh Palmyrene cavalry immediately, but to take their charge and pretend to flee until they saw that both their pursuers and their horses were abandoning the chase, exhausted by the heat and the weight of their armor. This is exactly what happened.[128]

By the time Aurelian invaded in 272 AD, Palmyra already controlled Egypt, the Levant, Syria, and central Anatolia up to Ancyra (Fig. 12). However, the previously successful military of Palmyra

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[128] Ibid 1.50.

Figure 12: Greatest extent of the Palmyrene Empire[129]

was soundly defeated by Aurelian's superior tactical planning. For the first time since its seemingly

spectacular rise, the Palmyrene Empire was contracting.

As Zosimus continues the account, he tells how Zabdas and Zenobia, who had fled with

their army to Antioch, feared that the residents of the city would rise up against them if they learned

that the Palmyrene army had been defeated. In order to secure their retreat, they "found a man who

resembled the emperor, and dressing him as Aurelian... led him through the middle of the city as

if they had captured the emperor alive."[130] The ruse was successful, and the Palmyrenes were able

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[129] "Palmyrene Empire," Wikiwand, accessed November 4, 2015.
[130] Zos 1.51.

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to retreat in good order with their remaining forces. However, Zosimus' tone suggests that he does not approve of the tactics utilized by the Palmyrenes. The parallels between this event and the manner in which Palmyra took Egypt, through the treachery of Timagenes, are notable. Zosimus was obsessed with honor, highlighting how Aurelian's honor "obliged" him to fight when he did. Zosimus contrasts Aurelian's upstanding Roman integrity with the treachery of the Palmyrenes, who resort to guile to accomplish their goals. While this is not necessarily reason to doubt Zosimus' story, it is important to bear in mind the qualifications of the account, and perhaps the didactic message employed drawing this comparison.

Conclusion

Zosimus concludes his history of Palmyra's military conflict with the battle of Emesa, where the Roman force, through superior discipline and bravery, overpowers the Palmyrenes, who flee in disarray.[131] The city falls to the Roman emperor shortly after. Zosimus is significant not only in giving the history of the battles between the Romans and Palmyrenes in 272 AD but also because of his descriptions of the Palmyrene army. Initially after Odenathus' death, the Palmyrenes appeared to be by far the best equipped, best trained army in the entire east, having defeated the Persians and being so successful in the attack on Egypt. However, when faced with a fresh Roman army led by a veteran military commander, the Palmyrenes are bested. The fact that the Palmyrenes can stand up at all against the Romans is not negligible, though, and perhaps indicates the skill of the caravan guards, though they were no match for trained legions from the west. It is possible, then, that Zenobia never intended to face fresh Roman forces. She intended to assert her authority over the eastern provinces, but may have only planned to fight the local forces, not any imperial

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[131] Ibid 1.53.

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army, and did not expect such an imperial army to come all the way to oppose her. Faced with dire economic prospects by the weakening of the Roman Empire and its effect on the caravan trade, Zenobia determined to see to the affairs of her city's interests independently of Roman influence. Once that decision was made, Palmyra's trained caravan guards and the remains of Odenathus' army ensured that she had the military forces to do so.

Chapter 4: Palmyra's Cosmopolitan Culture

Introduction

A final element of Palmyra's path to independence from Rome for us to examine is its cultural identity. For three centuries Palmyra was part of the Roman Empire, enjoying the benefits that came along with incorporation in the imperial fold. For the final half-century before its rebellion against Rome it even held the distinguished status of a *colonia*. How closely tied was Palmyra's culture to Rome? Did the Palmyrenes ever see themselves as "Roman"? And if not, how did they view themselves and their history? We will examine Palmyra's cultural heritage in this chapter to determine how it might have influenced Palmyra's third century rebellion.

The Founding of Palmyra

Palmyra was a diverse city that owed its existence to multiple different groups. It had both Semitic and Hellenistic roots which influenced its languages, architecture, and public image. The name of the city itself reflects these various ties. The name most commonly used today is "Palmyra," which comes from either the Greek or Latin word for "palm" and roughly translates to "City of Palms," reflecting the city's nature as an oasis settlement.[132] The other name commonly used to describe the city is "Tadmor," from the Semitic word for "date," which also refers to the city's distinctive palm trees.[133] Tadmor appears to precede Palmyra in referring to the city, as the earliest records, including the book of Chronicles in the Hebrew Bible, use that name.[134] By the time the city becomes a part of the Roman Empire, it is exclusively referred to as Palmyra by the Greek and Roman sources, though the name Tadmor is still used in Semitic-language

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[132] Smith, *Roman Palmyra*, 5.
[133] Millar, *The Roman Near East*, 320.
[134] Ibid 320.

inscriptions.[135] The native Palmyrene-speakers of the city would most likely have used the name

Tadmor, although both names appear on official inscriptions in the city.

The details of the city's foundation are uncertain, and different groups claim responsibly

for originally creating it. The earliest surviving written record that mentions the city comes from

the Bible, which tells how King Solomon "built up the Tadmor in the Desert".[136] Despite this

mention, there is no archaeological evidence surviving that suggests the city existed as an urban

center during King Solomon's tenth century BC reign in Israel.[137] In contrast, the earliest

archaeological remains of the city belong to a second century BC grave site, implying that while

the location was likely well-known before that point, probably because of its reliable fresh water

source, it was not a site of permanent settlement.[138] Later writing indicates that by the early first

century AD the city was not only present but well-known in the area. Josephus, writing in the first

century AD, records the following about the foundation of the city:

> He [Solomon] advanced into the desert of Upper Syria and, having taken possession
> of it, founded there a very great city at a distance of two days' journey from Upper
> Syria and one day's journey from the Euphrates, while from the great Babylon the
> distance was a journey of six days. Now the reason for founding the city so far from
> the inhabited parts of Syria was that further down there was no water anywhere in
> the land and that only in this place were springs and wells to be found. And so,
> when he had built this city and surrounded it with very strong walls, he named it
> Thadamora, as it is still called by the Syrians, while the Greeks call it Palmyra.[139]

Josephus is incorrect in his assessment of the distance from Palmyra to the other locales mentioned

in the passage. He also inaccurately gives Solomon credit for constructing Palmyra's walls, which

archaeological evidence suggests were not present until the first century BC at the earliest, and

likely later.[140] Nevertheless, Josephus sheds light on the contemporary first century AD view of

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[135] Ibid 330-332; Smith, *Roman Palmyra*, 122-125.
[136] NIV II Chronicles 8.4.
[137] Millar, *The Roman Near East*, 320.
[138] Ibid 320.
[139] Josephus *Antiquities of the Jews* 6, 1 (153-154), Loeb trans.
[140] Smith, *Roman Palmyra*, 21.

Palmyrene history. His assumption of fast travel between Palmyra and the Euphrates River may indicate Palmyra's widespread reputation as a trading hub. After all, to someone who has never traveled there, it would seem a safe assumption to think that Palmyra was conveniently close to the major waterway of the region.

Archaeological evidence points to a second century BC founding of the city.[141] Besides the grave site previously mentioned, few structures from this time remain. We must again return to the inscriptions as primary sources of information about the city. The earliest inscription in Palmyra, which celebrates the raising of a monument to the priests of Bel, contains the year 269 on the Seleucid calendar (which began in October 312 BC by modern estimates).[142] This provides us with the years 44/43 BC to date the inscription. It is located at the site of the great temple of Bel, which itself dates to the first century AD, but the presence of the inscription commemorating a religious monument suggests that another older temple previously stood on the same spot, pointing perhaps to earlier large-scale habitation. A relatively large group of inscriptions dating to the 20's BC further suggests that the city was well-established and sizeable by that time. Three honorific inscriptions also located near the temple of Bel mark tombs (in Palmyrene, literally "houses of eternity") for different families.[143] Another nearby inscription, dated to 21 BC, celebrates the end of a feud between two different Palmyrene tribes, the "sons of Komara" and the "sons of Maththabol".[144] The fact that such a feud existed suggests that while the city was settled by this point, it had not yet united into a single polity.

Another important moment in Palmyra's history was its "re-founding" as a Roman city. Although the Romans had incorporated the city into their empire sometime in the first century BC,

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[141] Millar, *The Roman Near East*, 321.
[142] Ibid 321.
[143] Ibid 321.
[144] Ibid 322.

under Pompey the Great's restructuring of the Roman Near Eastern provinces, it appears that Palmyra did little to integrate into the empire.[145] There is no evidence of a Roman garrison being installed, and no Latin inscriptions are dated to this period. At some point during the rule of Emperor Hadrian, between 114 and 138 AD, the city was officially renamed "Hadriana Palmyra," and was called by many Roman authors simply "Hadriana."[146] It is uncertain exactly why the city was renamed. Hadrian was a tireless emperor who made a point of traveling to every province in the empire, and the honorific title was perhaps assumed when Hadrian visited and symbolically "re-founded" the city.[147] This moment represents an initial step in "Romanizing" the city, connecting it more closely with Roman provincial administration and with the culture of the empire. A body of modern scholars, including Watson, believe that with Palmyra's title change came a change in Palmyra's status within the Roman Empire, becoming a "free city."[148] However, other scholars, including Millar, disagree and argue that the title did not constitute any official change in Palmyra's status.[149] What is certain is that in 214 AD Emperor Caracalla made Palmyra a *colonia*, giving it a unique status as a semi-autonomous polity with the ability to regulate its own commerce and pass its own laws.[150] Besides its legislative privileges, the *colonia* status also conferred a certain amount of respect on the nobles of the city, who would nominally be considered of the same rank as Rome's own blue-blooded aristocrats.[151] The city had taken another step toward Romanization. By this point, Palmyra was well-established in the Roman Empire as a lucrative center of trade.

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[145] Smith, *Roman Palmyra*, 21.
[146] Millar, *The Roman Near East*, 324.
[147] Ibid 324-25.
[148] Watson, *Aurelian and the Third Century*, 26.
[149] Millar, *The Roman Near East*, 325.
[150] Watson, *Aurelian and the Third Century*, 26.
[151] Millar, *The Roman Near East*, 335.

Palmyrene Government

Besides the archaeological evidence, information about the structure of Palmyra's government sheds light on both its establishment and on how the city functioned. Palmyra appears to have been modeled as a Greek *polis*, city-state, at least early in the life of the city. Surviving inscriptions, including the all-important Tax Law, indicate that it was led by a tripartite government, which divided power between a group of magistrates (*archontes*), a council *(boulé)*, and an assembly (*demos*).[152] Such a method of organization was not unique to Palmyra; in fact, it was a common model of Hellenistic cities throughout Asia, from the cities of the Seleucid Empire, in whose territory Palmyra was located, to those of the Indo-Greek kingdom in northern India.[153] The tax law of Palmyra names many of the civic offices of the city as *archontes*, a distinctively Greek title of public office.[154] In contrast, city-states of the Greek model did not exist in the Persian Empire to Palmyra's east, demonstrating Palmyra's ties, both when it was founded and well into its history, to Hellenism, and perhaps its inherent predisposition toward the west in general.

Language in the City

No analysis of Palmyra's culture would be complete without understanding the importance of languages in the city. It was not an unusual instance for a classical city to contain speakers of multiple different languages. The interconnectivity of the cities of the region, especially those within the Roman Empire, where ease and safety of travel were improved, meant that individuals were able to travel long distances away from their native lands to live and work elsewhere. Palmyra was no exception, and especially because of its location on the east-west trade route, it likely contained Greek, Arabic, Middle Persian, and Latin speakers in addition to those who spoke native

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[152] Ibid 325, Smith, *Roman Palmyra*, 15.
[153] Millar, *The Roman Near East*, 325.
[154] Ibid 325.

Palmyrene. What made Palmyra unique among cities of the time was the fact that it set up official inscriptions in multiple different languages. All of the official inscriptions surviving, those posted by the city's government rather than private individuals, contained multiple languages. Twenty-one of the inscriptions, including the all-important tax law, were bilingual, posted in both Palmyrene and Greek languages.[155] Nine were bilingual with Palmyrene and Latin versions.[156] Two were trilingual, written in Palmyrene, Greek, and Latin.[157] And according to Smith, "numerous" were posted in only Greek and Latin versions.[158]

It is important to recognize the unique nature of this structure of official publication. Most of the bilingual Palmyrene and Greek inscriptions have been dated to the period before the first century AD, prior to Palmyra's incorporation into the Roman Empire.[159] Palmyra was comparatively unusual in the Hellenistic world by recognizing both Greek and a native language on official inscriptions.[160] Many, though not all, Hellenistic cities posted official inscriptions exclusively in Greek, not using the native language in the governance of the city.[161] Palmyra's inscriptions were unique to the Roman world as well. Most *coloniae* were home to large populations of Latin-speaking Roman citizens, and official inscriptions were written only in that language. In contrast, Palmyra retained use of its native language in official business even as it drew closer to Rome in its political relationship. The continued expression of the Palmyrene language in official inscriptions suggests the degree of independence with which the city operated under the Romans, and possibly the importance that the Palmyrenes themselves placed on the language as part of their identity. That Greek and Latin were widely spoken by people in the city,

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[155] Smith, *Roman Palmyra*, 16.
[156] Ibid 16.
[157] Ibid 16.
[158] Ibid 16.
[159] Ibid 12-16.
[160] Ibid 12.
[161] Ibid 12.

either permanent residents or passing traders, is apparent, and though the Palmyrene authorities continued to respect and use their native language, they also wanted to ensure that their inscriptions could be read by the largest possible audience.

Palmyrene Architecture

The various groups influencing Palmyrene culture are further evident through the architecture of the city. What survives of the common dwellings of the city resemble those of other desert cities of the Near East.[162] They owe their design to pragmatism over any cultural affinity toward the other cities of the region, as buildings in such a hot and dry environment need to maximize the comfort of their occupants. In the city's public buildings, however, we can glean information about the cultural influences on Palmyra. One of the most recognizable public features of the city is the Grand Colonnade (Fig. 13), a colonnaded avenue through the main part of the city

Figure 13: Ruins of the Grand Colonnade of Palmyra in 2014[163]

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[162] Ibid 114-118.

[163] "Syrian forces recapture ancient city of Palmyra frok ISIS," Associated Press, accessed April 10, 2016. http://www.timesfreepress.com/news/breakingnews/story/2016/mar/27/syrian-forces-recapture-ancient-city-palmyra-isis/357392/.

linking the Western Gate to the great temple of Bel.[164] The colonnade features more than 1,500

intricately-carved Corinthian columns lining a kilometer-long boulevard leading from the city gate

to the temple of Bel.[165] It features the largest collection of columns in the entire Near East.

Foremost among the city's architecture is the great temple of Bel, a massive structure dedicated to

a triad of the Palmyrene pantheon's principal gods, Bel, Yarhibol, and Aglibol.[166] The diversity of

Palmyra's pantheon further reflects the diversity of the city. Bel was the chief Babylonian deity,

the same figure as the Phoenician god Ba'al, who is well known in the West for opposing the

Israelites in the Hebrew Bible.[167] Yarhibol is the Aramean god of spring whose cult extended as

far as southern Palestine and Cappadocia, and Aglibol appears to have been a native Palmyrene

sun god.[168] These three protectors of the city, alternately adopted from foreign or local divinity

Figure 14: Digital reconstruction of the great temple of Bel after its first-century AD expansion[169]

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[164] Smith, *Roman Palmyra* ,26-27.
[165] "Ruins of the Grand Colonnade of Palmyra," accessed May 15, 2016.
[166] Millar, *The Roman Near East*, 323.
[167] Ibid 323.
[168] Ibid 323.
[169] "Temple of Bel," Wikimedia, accessed April 10, 2016. https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/a/a8/
Bassel-bel-3.jpg.

cults, were worshipped in the huge 205-meter-long temple (reconstructed in Fig. 14), by far the largest building in the city, which itself exhibited a combination of Graeco-Roman and Eastern influences.[170] The asymmetrical entrances of the temple gave way not to statues of the honored deities, as was customary in Greek and Roman temples, but to low-hanging relief paintings of the deities, a unique element of Palmyrene religious architecture.[171] The central courtyard is surrounded by stepped columns in typical Greek and Roman format (Fig. 15). The temple is also

Figure 15: Remains of the temple of Bel in 2012[172]

the site of one of Palmyra's two trilingual inscriptions, written in Latin, Greek, and Palmyrene, celebrating the patronage of the Roman citizen and tax collector L. Spedius Chrysanthus.[173] The varied influences of Palmyra's public architecture reflect the diversity of the city itself, which did not view itself as a member of any of the individual groups which influenced it but instead a blend

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[170] Millar, *The Roman Near East*, 323.
[171] Ibid 323.
[172] "ISIS destroys Temple of Bel in Palmyra, Syria, U.N. reports," CNN, accessed April 10, 2016. http://www.amren.com/news/2015/09/isis-destroys-temple-of-bel-in-palmyra-syria-u-n-reports//.
[173] Millar, *The Roman Near East*, 324.

of all of them. In combining familiar elements of all of these different groups, the Palmyrenes demonstrate the flexibility of their own identity. They draw upon aspects of the many different groups in the city to employ them in different manners, a possible indication of how they could later brush off their failing Roman identity to fully embrace a sort of Hellenistic independence.

Cultural Expression during Zenobia's Revolt

When Zenobia eventually assumed leadership of Palmyra in 267 AD, she would have been acutely aware of the various cultural influences on her city. As she took Palmyra farther from the Roman fold and developed it into its own "empire," she utilized public image as a means of exerting influence. Before her, Odenathus had acted loyally as a Roman vassal king, carrying out duties in Rome's best interests and accepting in return the titles of *corrector of the east, most famous Senator and Lord of Tadmor, most famous consular,* and *King of Kings.*[174] According to Zosimus and the Historia Augusta, Odenathus was content to embrace the Roman model of vassalage and, whether or not he actually viewed himself as culturally Roman, he chose to abide by the Roman model of leadership. Zosimus praises Odenathus' "careful administration," declaring him worthy of the titles he received.[175] The Historia Augusta too paints him as "that excellent emperor" of the east, diligent in his pursuit of Rome's enemies and without whom "all would have been lost in the East."[176]Indeed, the recorded facts point to Odenathus' support for the Romans through his active campaigning against the Persians and his rejection of Macrianus' claim to the emperorship, although both of those actions could just as easily reflect Odenathus' desire to preserve his own city's prosperity, regardless of imperial politics.

[174] Potter, *The Roman Empire at Bay*, 242.
[175] Zos 1.39.
[176] Historia Augusta, *The Thirty Tyrants*, 15.50-16.57.

In contrast, Zenobia took pains to portray herself in a different model, along the Hellenistic tradition. She openly identified herself with Cleopatra, the beautiful and ambitious queen of Ptolemaic Egypt who so famously defied Rome.[177] Her statues in the city bore resemblance to those of Cleopatra in Alexandria.[178] She highlighted Palmyra's old Ptolemaic connections by restoring Ptolemaic monuments in Alexandria and throughout Egypt.[179] The Palmyrene elites at least tolerated this imaging, and some were overt in their respect for it. For example, Callinicus of Petra, a Greek orator and well-known Sophist who emigrated from Petra to Athens to teach, and who was apparently a friend of Emperor Gallienus, dedicated his ten-volume work on the history of Alexandria to "Zenobia, the new Cleopatra."[180] Callinicus' work does not survive, but he appears to have been a strong supporter of Palmyra's empire. He moved from Athens first to Palmyra, and later to Alexandria after its conquest by Palmyra.[181] Another Hellenistic philosopher, Cassius Longinus, a Platonist, became a teacher and chief counselor to Zenobia throughout her rule. Both men also suffered for their loyalty to Zenobia; they were executed along with much of Zenobia's court after Palmyra fell to Aurelian in 273 AD.[182] The Historia Augusta confirms this Hellenistic representation, explaining that Zenobia "boasted herself to be of the family of the Cleopatras and the Ptolemies."[183]

It is clear through Callinicus' example that Zenobia, at least initially, embraced the role of Cleopatra opposing Rome. She managed to appeal to a broad spectrum of social, ethnic, and religious groups. Nomadic tribesmen and urban artists, Bedouins and Greeks, Pagans and Jews, all coexisted in Palmyra's empire without internal revolt. Perhaps they were all riding Palmyra's

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[177] Watson, *Aurelian and the Third Century*, 65.
[178] Ibid 64-66.
[179] Ibid 65.
[180] Ibid 65.
[181] Ibid 65.
[182] Ibid 65.
[183] Historia Augusta, *The Thirty Tyrants*, 30.2.

rising tide for the first few years of its rapid military expansion, or perhaps Zenobia capitalized on widespread disaffection with a Rome which had proven itself unable to protect its people from aggressive Persian raids for the past decade.

Numismatic Evidence from the Palmyrene Empire

As the Palmyrene army continued its conquest of the Roman Near East, the great mint cities of Alexandria and Antioch continued to produce coins. At first, evidenced by issues dated to 270 AD (Fig. 15), those coins bore the faces of both Vaballathus, Zenobia's son and the symbolic ruler of the city, as well as Emperor Aurelian.[184] The seemingly strange phenomenon, minting

Figure 15: Antoninianus from 270 AD depicting Vaballathus (obverse) and Aurelian (reverse)[185]

coins bearing the Roman Emperor's face even as Palmyrene armies slaughter Roman garrisons and overthrow imperial prefects, provides doubt about the intentions of the Palmyrene revolt. Did Zenobia truly intend to forge her own Palmyrene Empire out of the Near East? Or was she merely asserting her husband's rightfully-granted titles in the Emperor's name? The above Antoninianus

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[184] Potter, *Roman Empire at Bat*, 266-268.
[185] "Palmyrene Coins," accessed May 12, 2016.
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:AURELIANUS_RIC_V_381-795833.jpg

lists Vaballathus' titles as "Vabalathus VC R IM DR," translated to *Vabalathus Vir Clarissimus Rex Imperator Dux Romanorum*. *Vir clarissimus* translates literally to "very famous man," and was a way for provincials to indicate that they held Roman senatorial status. Therefore, by highlighting these titles for Vaballathus on the same coin as Aurelian, the Palmyrenes were asserting that Vaballathus served at the pleasure of, and as a result of, Aurelian's own authority.

Later coins removed any trace of the Roman Emperor and showed only Vaballathus (Fig. 16), only Zenobia (Fig. 17), or in one case Vaballathus and Zenobia together (Fig. 18).[186] It appears that a shift occurred between 270 and 271 AD, during which the Palmyrenes shed the appearance of loyalty to Rome through altering the coinage minted throughout their territory.

Figure 16: Antoninianus from 272 AD depicting Vaballathus (obverse) and the personified Augustan Equity (reverse)[187]

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[186] Ibid 267-278.
[187] "Roman Imperial Coinage of Vabalathus," accessed May 17, 2016. http://www.wildwinds.com/coins/ric/vabalathus/RIC_0001.jpg

Figure 17: Antoninianus from 271 AD depicting Zenobia (obverse) and the goddess Juno (reverse)[188]

Figure 18: Tetradrachm from 271-272 AD depicting Vaballathus (obverse) and Zenobia (reverse)[189]

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[188] "Palmyrene Coins."

[189] "Alexandrian tet, Emmett 3910," accessed May 17, 2016. https://www.cointalk.com/attachments/vabzen-jpg.364926/

Despite the apparent shift away from Rome through the change in coin depictions, the manner in which Vaballathus was shown is significant as well. Early Palmyrene coins from Alexandria depicted Vaballathus in the vein of a Greek *basileus*, or king. However, later coins began to take on a more Roman, imperial model, depicting Vaballathus as a Roman Emperor.[190] Furthermore, the later coins also gave Vaballathus the titles "IM C VHABALATHUS AUG," *Imperator Caesar Vhabalathus Augustus*, clearly allowing Vaballathus to take the traditional Roman Emperor's titles. Perhaps the early depictions were meant to maintain the model set forth by Odenathus in which the Palmyrene ruler styled himself as a loyal vassal king continuing to serve the Roman Emperor. It would make sense, then, if Palmyra did indeed choose to assert its independence in 271 AD, that they should adopt the imperial model of coinage to symbolize Vaballathus' replacement of Aurelian as the rightful ruler of his territory. Yet this model does not explain the adoption of the *basileus* image in the first place, an image that Odenathus had not taken steps to craft, and which itself could be an assertion of independence despite the continued depiction of Aurelian.

Conclusion

Did the shift intend to show Palmyra's people that Vaballathus had assumed the position of the Roman Emperor, overcoming their great enemy? Or did it reflect a changing view of the Palmyrene people that they did not desire complete independence from Rome? It is possible that the renewed imperial imagery intended to assuage the public's concerns about the faltering independence movement and emphasize the new Palmyrene Empire as a continuation of the Roman Empire. It is important to bear in mind that, as a *colonia*, it was common for Palmyrenes, especially the highest echelons of society, to publicly emphasize their Roman ranks.[191] They were

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[190] Watson, *Aurelian and the Third Century*, 66.
[191] Millar, *The Roman Near East*, 335.

not merely provincial nobles but *equites* and *senators* in the true Roman sense, hence *vir clarissimus*. Another detail to bear in mind is the precise route through which Zenobia's generals marched their armies. As they moved first to occupy Egypt and then marched across Asia Minor toward Europe, they followed the exact paths used by Vespasian two centuries earlier.[192] In the year 69 AD Vespasian quelled a major upheaval in the nascent Roman Empire by marching his legions from Judea to Italy to defeat the pretender Vitellius and end the instability of the "Year of the Four Emperors."[193] In embracing the "Roman-ness" of her claim, Zenobia demonstrates not only Palmyra's close connection to Roman culture, but also possibly her goal not to be content with a breakaway state but to establish herself as head of the entire Roman Empire. After all, some of the many pretenders who contested for *imperium* during the third century originated from Palmyra's very backyard in the Roman Near East. Less than a decade earlier the revolts of Macrianus and Quietus in 261 AD and Maeonius in 266 AD were put down by Odenathus. Zenobia may have been trying her hand at this model of usurpation, not only of Palmyra's leadership but of the whole of the Roman Empire.

Palmyra's distinct history meant that numerous different groups came to influence the city. It carried ties to its Near Eastern and Persian vicinity, its Hellenistic roots, and its Roman political incorporation. All of these groups made Palmyra, from its languages, architecture, and political organization, into what it was at the end of the third century AD. Zenobia drew upon the collective consciousness of her city to portray herself first as a conquering Hellenistic queen, and later in a more traditionally Roman model. If Palmyra's revolt against Rome was prompted by economic concerns and took place through military means, it was enabled by Palmyra's unique and diverse cultural identity.

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[192] Ibid 335.
[193] Greg Woolf, *Rome: An Empire's Story* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) 132-135.

Chapter 5: Why Palmyra? Conclusions and Significance Today

Our examination of Palmyra's brief but spectacular independence movement has taken us across centuries of history, following mighty imperial armies and dusty desert caravan routes, and continually centered on a city steeped in cosmopolitanism and wealth. The Palmyrene Empire appears unlike any in history, a tiny city ruling over a vast expanse containing many cultures and people, governed by an ambitious and proud ruler, but ultimately unable to maintain its territorial gains and stamped out almost as quickly as it rose. At least, that is the story put forward by the literary sources which survive and provide much of the information available about the period. After examining the story told by the literary sources, we have sought to supplement, balance, and qualify the literary record with archaeological, epigraphic, and numismatic evidence wherever possible to examine Palmyra's history. From that examination a different story emerges. Palmyra's revolt is not merely one megalomaniac capitalizing on an opportunistic situation to carve her own empire, but instead a gradual buildup, full of subtle motivations and unique opportunities, that results in the events that proceeded and were recorded by the contemporary sources.

So why do the sources pitch the story in the way that they do? Zosimus and the Historia Augusta take great pains to highlight Zenobia's "foreignness." They do not necessarily portray her in an overtly negative manner: both sources praise her personal vigor and ingenuity, with Zosimus proclaiming her "endowed with the mind of a man" and the Historia Augusta calling her "the noblest of all women in the East... more brave than her husband."[194] Still, they highlight the fact that she was clearly not a Roman leader. Not only was she female, but her customs and religion were foreign.

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[194] Zos 1.39; Historia Augusta, *The Thirty Tyrants*, 15.8.

Though the later sources, dating one to three hundred years after the revolt, are keen to show how exceptional Zenobia and her revolt were, given the context of what we have examined about the period they may not be so alien after all. During the tumultuous period from 235 to 284, usurpers declared themselves emperor throughout the entire empire, including two, Macrianus and Maeonius, right on Zenobia's doorstep. These usurpers claimed the imperial title, and most, not content to remain in the hinterland provinces, had the intention of eventually marching on Rome to assert their claim directly. There is no reason to be certain that Zenobia did not have this same intention, and indeed many of her actions in 271-272 AD, including adopting an overtly Roman model of coinage and following Vespasian's initial path of conquest, indicate that she may have had a conquest of Rome in mind as an endgame.

Furthermore, revolt against Rome's central government was not a unique third century phenomenon. Rome had faced pretender governments even before it was ruled by emperors. One of the most notorious of such movements was the revolt of Quintus Sertorius, and the resulting Sertorian War, between 80 and 72 BC. Sertorius, a Roman governor in the waning days of the republic, opposed the rise of the dictator Lucius Cornelius Sulla and established a senate-in-exile in the province of Hispania.[195] Sertorius did not claim to govern a breakaway empire, but instead asserted his rule as the legitimate, albeit exiled, government of the Roman Republic. And of course, Emperor Vespasian came to rule the empire only by marching his army from Judea to Italy in 69 AD and deposing Vitellius.[196] Zenobia's continued embrace of the Roman model demonstrates that she may have had a similar goal in mind, following the model of predecessors throughout Rome's long history.

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[195] Woolf, *Rome*, 97-102.
[196] Ibid 169-171.

Why, then, are the sources so adamant that Palmyra was different? One possible reason may relate to their manner of portraying not only Zenobia and her empire, but their main opponent, Aurelian. Aurelian was widely celebrated as the "restorer of the Empire," and he is credited with ending the worst period of Rome's third century crisis, although military usurpers continued to press claims after his death in 275 AD. Both the Historia Augusta and Zosimus broadly praise Aurelian's successes, not only in defeating Palmyra but also in quelling revolt and barbarian invasions across the empire, and he is remembered fondly by Roman and Byzantine sources well after the third century. In their quest to laud Aurelian and his triumphs, the sources required a formidable and ambitious enemy who needed to be defeated. Zenobia and Palmyra provided just such a model for Zosimus and the Historia Augusta to parade before their readers, painting a vivid picture of a major threat to Rome and "Roman-ness" in the East that could only be defeated by Aurelian, the savior of the empire.

The significance of Palmyra's revolt is not merely the image of Aurelian that resulted from it, although the goal of shaping that image may well have influenced some of the writers to record information about the incident. There are also important implications for the history of the Near East. After Zenobia's defeat the Near East was reincorporated into the Roman Empire, and it remained a productive part of the empire for the next two centuries of Rome's dominance. Even after the Western Roman Empire fell in 476 AD, the territory continued to thrive within the Byzantine Empire, providing valuable territories for the early empire and fully embracing Roman/Byzantine culture during that time. It was not until the Arab conquests of the seventh century AD that the Near East was wrenched out of the traditional Roman sphere of culture. During those four hundred years of continued Roman influence, from the third to the seventh centuries, the region contributed resources, ideas, and people to Rome or Constantinople. Also during this

time Christianity spread rapidly through the Empire's organizational apparatus. If Zenobia had successfully revolted and created a breakaway state embracing a non-Roman image, as the sources depicted, the region would have been wrenched out of the periphery of Roman culture and either developed along more distinctly local cultural model or more fully embraced one of the many existing within it. I will not speculate on what that culture would have achieved, but it is safe to say that Roman influence on Europe and the world would have waned as a result.

Palmyra is indeed a fascinating case study. Its depiction by contemporary and near-contemporary sources demonstrates the importance of reading beyond what is recorded. Yet besides the qualifications that the sources require, it is also a captivating and unique incident from history, that a small and remote city-state would be able to amass such wealth, and later such power. Though at first glance it seems that Palmyra is an unlikely place to lead a major rebellion against Rome, a more careful look at the city's exceptional history, and especially its economic, military, and cultural background, demonstrates that the city was actually uniquely situated to lead just such a rebellion. The city's history, combined with the circumstances of the time, gave Palmyra the opportunity to seize a chance at independence from Rome; its reaction to that opportunity shaped history for centuries to follow.

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