
ZENOBIA OF PALMYRA: REALITY OR LEGEND?

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(Received 14/03/2017; accepted 26/06/2017)

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25159/1013-8471/2442>

ABSTRACT

Ancient Rome had a longstanding and turbulent history with eastern queens, beginning, before its very foundation, with Dido, and most famously exemplified by Cleopatra. Literature suggests powerful women from the East were particularly feared and loathed, considered the ultimate “Others”. The Palmyrene queen, Zenobia, who claimed her descent from Cleopatra and briefly conquered Egypt, was reportedly grudgingly admired and, although finally vanquished by Aurelian and purportedly displayed in his triumph, may have been allowed to retire comfortably to a villa in Tivoli. Reconstructing the lives and interrogating the existence of these often marginalised historical “protagonists” is often difficult as the sources are often unreliable and depict these uncomfortable subjects either marginally or with disquiet. In this article, the reconstruction of the historical figure of Zenobia will be interrogated through a review of the literature available on this female figure in an attempt to answer the question of whether or not it is possible to reconstruct “marginalised” historical figures from the historical evidence available to us today. Furthermore, it will be shown that although it may be possible to reconstruct these figures, the image that is created is often tainted by the original texts, which often lack veracity and were almost certainly purposefully created.

INTRODUCTION

“I am a queen; and as long as I live I will reign.”¹

“In the year 274 CE, the Emperor Aurelian, rode through the city streets of Rome in a magnificent chariot that once belonged to the king of the Goths, pulled by four matching white stags and followed by 800 pairs of gladiators, 20 elephants and hundreds of wild beasts from conquered lands” (Hist Aug. *Aur.* 33.4). A massive procession that took time to wend its way past the cheering triumphant throngs glorying vicariously in Rome’s imperialism, all the while reinforcing the ideological

¹ This oft mentioned yet unverifiable quotation is commonly attributed to Zenobia herself.

narrative perceived as reality that the Roman Empire was once again reunited, having been fractured for more than a generation. Aurelian had succeeded in the first years of his rule in achieving this feat that culminated in the defeat of a rebel foreign queen.

The focus of this triumph was certainly Queen Zenobia of Palmyra who, after consolidating her own position and territory, had extended her authority, and for a short while had challenged the might of Rome. Zenobia had raised a coalition army of discontented easterners, seizing perhaps a third of the Roman Empire, including that vast, rich, and fertile jewel in the Empire's crown, Egypt. The eastern areas had fallen swiftly to the power of Palmyra and its ruling queen and self-proclaimed empress, Zenobia, who had emerged as a successful leader, only to ultimately be thoroughly subdued by the emperor Aurelian and displayed as proof of Rome's invincibility to its people. For Aurelian, this visual was a commemoration of his *gloria*, and ensured public approbation and support, transforming his individual success into the public narrative of what it meant to be Roman.

The ever-colourful *Historiae Augusta*, "a garden of delights ... made by a frivolous imposter" to quote Syme (1968:4),² riddled with errors and fabrications, describes the pageantry of the captive queen riding along the parade route in a

² Joshua Mark (2014) suggests that *Historia Augusta* (HA) should be read in the same light as one would read ancient Mesopotamian *Naru* literature which is characterised by stories featuring a well-known figure from the past (usually a king) as the main character in a quasi-historical tale, which either extolled the king's military prowess, told the tale of his life and reign, or, more often, used the king to exemplify the proper relationship between human beings and the gods. The main character (king) was always an actual historical figure, but the story was either fictional or slanted in a particular way in order to achieve a desired impression. The same paradigm applies in that the tales of the Roman rulers are given as "teaching moments" through which one learns what it means to be a good monarch or a poor one, a great man or a mediocre specimen of humanity. The HA belongs to the most intensively studied works of classical historiography. The single authorship of the HA was first established by Dessau in 1889, whose view was further advanced by Ronald Syme, who stressed the importance of the more imaginative parts of the work, in an effort to obtain a clear picture of the author's conceptions of historiography. Syme (1971:263) acknowledges this as a source of reference but saw the author of the HA as "a rogue scholar saw the fun to be got from erudition". He saw the HA as "a garden of delights, with abundant refreshment" (Syme 1968:4), and proceeds to cast doubt upon the authors, the veracity of the "Thirty tyrants" and some of the facts contained therein.

magnificent chariot weighed down by so many pearls and gems that attendants supposedly had to help her carry her golden chains.

... she was adorned with gems so huge that she laboured under the weight of her ornaments (Hist Aug. *Tyr. Trig.* 30.24).³

Furthermore, her feet were bound with shackles of gold and her hands with golden fetters, and even on her neck she wore a chain of gold, the weight of which was borne by a Persian buffoon (Hist Aug. *Tyr. Trig.* 30.26).

And there came Zenobia, too, decked with jewels and in golden chains, the weight of which was borne by others (Hist Aug. *Aur.* 31.3).

For Zenobia herself, there is a distinct lack of reliable and coherent source material, and she remains very much a shadowy, enigmatic figure. The line between historical reality and historical fiction is blurred as she, as well as the authors of that time and those to come, used legend and invention to create an aura of Eastern romance and the smoke screen which obscures, for us, the real Zenobia and her heroic qualities (Southern 2008:1). She may have been a remarkable person, but it is just as likely her fame was created through modern imagination. Zenobia has been invented and reinvented through the mediums of brush, pen, and chisel from classical times down to the present day, subjected to so much embellishment and reinterpretation that she exercised a powerful hold on the imagination, and still does, but how much of the “fact” is true and how much can be ascribed to “urban legend”, speculation, romanticisation, and the deliberate misinformation of the Roman historians of the time? History is, after all, the reflection of the beliefs of an author, in many cases, the beliefs of the victors of war, rather than an unbiased reflection of what actually occurred. The authorship of ancient Rome frequently applied a biased view of their leadership, either in an effort to secure victories or as a means of propagandising, with the expectation that social and political perspectives could be shaped by the messages created. The

³ *Tyr. Trig.* as referenced here is the “Thirty tyrants”.

general bias present in the historiography of the ancient world clearly created a subjugated view of women.

SOURCES FOR ZENOBIA

The majority of the information available is from the *Scriptores Historia Augusta* (*Historia Augusta* – HA), a collection of biographies covering the majority of the Roman emperors from Hadrian to Carinus, represented as being written by six different historians⁴ and which is generally concluded nowadays to be permeated with errors, fabrications, and distortions, with the further suggestion that the HA is considered to have been written by one single unknown person utilising six *noms de plumes* (Burgersdijk 2006:139).

Zenobia's history or biography can be found contained in the book *Triginta Tyranni*, the “Thirty tyrants”, a compilation of a group of some thirty-two usurpers, supposedly written, retrospectively, by a certain “Trebellius Pollio” in 395 C.E., a considerable historical remove from the actual events. The particular section on Zenobia, with its twenty-seven subchapters, is by far the longest section of this particular book. Narratively, she is preceded by other family members, and the Tyrants culminates or climaxes with Zenobia, thus indicating the dire depths to which the empire had fallen in that it states ominously in the preface that even women were able to reign: “Had not the ways of Gallienus brought it about that women, too, should be deemed worthy of mention” (*Hist Aug. Tyr. Trig.* 1.1).

Little historical fact on the reign of Zenobia can be corroborated as there are virtually no extant contemporary writings. Various events from the reign of Aurelianus (Aurelian) (270–275 C.E.) may be substantiated from later writings on the emperor, but it is often equally unknown where these authors derived their information from. Once again, much of this also appears to have originated from the biography of Aurelian also contained in the HA.

⁴ Namely Aelius Spartianus, Julius Capitolinus, Vulcacius Gallicanus, Flavius Vopiscus, Trebellius Pollio, and Aelius Lampridius. The pertinent “historians” for Zenobia and Aurelius are Trebellius Pollio and Flavius Vopiscus.

Other writers mentioning Zenobia include Eutropius, Eusebius, Malalas, and, even considerably later, the twelfth century Zonaras.⁵ Her accounts do not support each other and in some cases actually contradict. On the surface Zenobia appears well accounted for: she is mentioned in literature, inscriptions, and on coinage, as well as featuring in more than just Roman literature; she is mentioned through anecdotes in Arab, Jewish, and Manichean texts (Southern 2008:2). Zosimos, a sixth century Byzantine historian, had access to various primary sources⁶ when he wrote his *Historia Nova* (trans. Ridley 1982), but of those little is still available for verification. Additionally, no literary texts in either Latin or Greek are extant, only brief mentions in the Arab histories and the even briefer ones in the Talmud.

The minimal extant contemporary evidence is limited to a few inscriptions and some papyrus fragments. Coinage, reflecting the progress of her rule, predominantly reflects her in a stylised, Romanised fashion and does not indicate her true appearance. Inscriptions accompany empty niches which still remain to attest to statuary of her, thus there are no confirmed sculptural representations. The only surviving statue believed to have possibly been of Zenobia is now so damaged as to be useless. Palmyran statues of other contemporaries reflect how she may have been represented ideally,⁷ but these still would not have truly reflected her, rather an ideological image of her (Southern 2008:3). A statue of her that once stood next to one of her husband, Odaenathus, high on a pillar in Palmyra, is long gone.⁸ Consensus of opinion is that Aurelian may have destroyed it on her defeat.

Numismatically, expansion of her empire can be charted as her image joined with several of the emperors: Cladius Gothicus, his brother Quintillus, and finally Aurelian,

⁵ John Zonaras was a Byzantine chronicler and theologian who wrote *Extracts of history*, a history from creation until the death of Alexius in 1118 C.E.

⁶ Dexippus and Eunapius for the first period of 270 to 440 C.E. and after 407 C.E., Olympiodorus.

⁷ Typical Palmyrene women are depicted with large almond-shaped eyes set in strong, firmly outlined features gazing unemotionally into the distance.

⁸ A small column next to the tetrapylon, close to the Temple of Bel, carries an inscription for Zenobia. Next to that is an inscription for her husband, Odaenathus, and close by one which is considered to possibly be for her father Julius Aurelius Zenobia.

and more importantly with her son, Vaballathus. In all cases she is shown as secondary to the male in what was very much the male-dominated ancient world.

WHY IS SHE MENTIONED?

The Romans distrusted women who rose above their station and who, by virtue of their sex, were then perceived as a threat to Roman moral fibre. Powerful women were anathema to the Roman aristocratic male and due to societal constraints were subsequently not depicted realistically or to their fullest as leaders, political or military rulers. Few foreign queens, including such as Dido of Carthage, Berenice of Judea, Semiramis of Assyria, Cleopatra of Egypt, and Boudicca of Britain, escaped the disdain and scorn of the male Roman historian.⁹ Thus they were written about from a male perspective and with male bias, which coloured their stories appropriately, often being represented as abusers rather than users of power. Women who meddled or thrust themselves into the exclusive male political and military sphere, considered bastions of masculinity, were categorised as harbingers of a world turned upside down. The dividing line between the female sphere of domestic life and the public life of men was inviolate and woe to any women who was perceived to have overstepped it. Being a woman at the same time as being a dangerous enemy was not a comfortable concept in Rome's conceptual world (Wyke 1992:126).¹⁰

Zenobia was part of this tradition, as well as being closely linked with at least two of these powerful women, Dido and, more importantly, Cleopatra, claiming the mantle of one and descent from the other. Zenobia was considered just another in a line of

⁹ The concept of building the image of a foe into a physically daunting and fearful image is a literary device employed by several of the ancient historians. The reader or listener was then carefully steered along the path the author intended them to take to appreciate and strengthen their faith in the power of Rome brought about through the glorious imperial eagles. The images of these "barbarian" women were of dangerous and cunning opponents who lived beyond the conventions of civilised society. Additionally, these portrayals, loaded with bias and propaganda, supplied the justification for going to war against a woman.

¹⁰ It should be noted that this attitude, in one form or another, has carried on through the ages and was not something unique to the Roman world.

women who disrupted the natural order and presumed to put themselves above men, ultimately leading people to chaos, death and destruction. As a rich and powerful Eastern female, Zenobia had succeeded, albeit momentarily, in fracturing and plundering the empire. In a world where females were often viewed in literature and historical narratives as conniving, unreliable, and dangerous, she was very similar to the woman she claimed as one of her ancestors, Cleopatra VII, who had for generations been vilified as the epitome of depravity, a dangerously seductive Oriental despot who lived a life of extravagance in direct contrast to the down to earth traditions espoused by the emperor Augustus. Moreover, Zenobia humiliated Rome with her military successes. She represented everything held despicable by the ruling male elite of Rome. As aptly quoted but applied differently, “Many a woman has been the dismal cause of war” (Hor. *Sat.* 1.3).

Certainly, Zenobia’s story is presented as man versus woman, ambition versus fall, women versus her social confines, even multi-culturalism versus the centralised state (Winsbury 2010:28). Her accounts were written retrospectively, with a definite Roman bias and without that factor which we now consider as substantiated research. Zenobia’s life in *Historia Augusta* is idealised rhetoric; she is praised in both the *Thirty pretenders* and *Aurelian*, being portrayed as a true paragon and a great beauty. Typically, female leaders were generally viewed in terms of their physical beauty; their capacity as strong leaders was never held to the same kind of scrutiny and standards as was done for men. In truth, women were viewed primarily in terms of beauty and chastity and only secondary to that was their leadership capacity.

The author of HA actually devotes more space to Zenobia than to her husband Odaenathus, but gives as little information. He freely admits that although he is documenting her life, he knows little, and his ultimate objective is to discredit the emperor Gallienus. In his opinion Gallienus was the worst emperor and the fact that a woman was permitted to rule, even a part of the empire, without decisive and suppressive action being taken was proof enough that Gallienus was weak and ineffective:

It was with deliberate purpose that I included the women, namely that I might make a mock of Gallienus, a greater monster than whom the Roman state has never endured (Hist Aug. *Tyr. Trig.* 31.7).

To clarify the message and to achieve this contrast, Zenobia is initially portrayed as a competent, strong and effective ruler, of a far higher standard than the incumbent Roman emperor was or could ever be (Southern 2008:11). She is seen emerging as a “true paragon, beautiful with striking countenance and dark eyes, but chaste ... enduring hardships without complaint” (Southern 2008:11).

Therefore, although that which is written about her is predominantly in a positive vein, this may not have been the case and what follows is an example of reverse bias:

Now all shame is exhausted, for in the weakened state of the commonwealth things came to such a pass that, while Gallienus conducted himself in the most evil fashion, even women ruled most excellently (Hist Aug. *Tyr. Trig.* 30.1).¹¹

BACKGROUND

Zenobia cannot be explained without first understanding her city, Palmyra. Both are exotic and their histories are inseparably entwined. Located in what is modern-day Syria, Palmyra – known as Tadmor in the Semitic language – was originally not much more than an outpost. Yet Palmyra was situated on one of the world’s wealthiest trade routes and it may well have been this that proved the deciding and motivating factor that drove her to rebel against Rome and to ultimately suffer the backlash of Roman repercussions.

Tadmor is a name derived from the Arabic root *tamar*, meaning “date” and signifying a palm tree. Thus first known as Tadmor¹² in Aramaic before becoming Palmyra, which in Latin also means date palm, it started as a settlement outpost with a

¹¹ This *topos* is something that occurs elsewhere in history, notably Xerxes who, when referring to Artemisia, his female naval commander is reported to have stated: “My men fight like women, and my women like men!” (Hdt. 8.88).

¹² It is still known as Tadmor.

small population situated at an oasis halfway between the Mediterranean and the Euphrates River, 130 miles northeast of Damascus, Syria.

The first written records occur in the Assyrian and Mari records of the early second millennium B.C.E. There is an elusive mention in both Chronicles and Kings¹³ of Solomon founding “Tadmor in the wilderness”, which may indeed push its founding even further back to the third century B.C.E. (2 Chronicles 8.4; 1 Kings 9.18). After the decline of the Seleucid Empire and its final overthrow by Pompey, several small Arab principalities sprang up over Syria; a confederation of four Arab tribes, the Komare, Battabol, Maazin, and the ‘Amlaqi or ‘Amalaqi, officially founded Palmyra.

During the first century B.C.E., Palmyra, also once known as the “bride of the desert”, became a metropolis for trade caravans crossing the Syrian Desert, ever growing in importance and influence over time. Its oasis position and resultant water supply was an integral part of its evolution and importance. So much so that in 41 B.C.E., Marc Antony attempted to capture Palmyra, supposedly in retribution for the town giving aid to the Parthians, or perhaps, more likely, as Appian states, “he was attracted there by its wealth”. Appian states:

Antony sent a cavalry force to Palmyra, situated not far from the Euphrates, to plunder it, bringing the trifling accusations against its inhabitants, that, being on the frontier between the Romans and the Parthians, they had avoided taking sides between them; for, being merchants, they bring the products of India and Arabia and dispose of them in the Roman territory. In fact, Antony’s intention was to enrich his horsemen (App. *B Civ.* 5.1.9).

Over the next one hundred years, Palmyra was to become an important asset of the empire, being the first Roman outpost reached by those caravans taking the long overland trek from China known as the “Silk Road” on the East-West trade. At the crossroads between Persia and Rome, the culture of Palmyra was a melting pot

¹³ This however can be disputed on the grounds of confusion or misinterpretation/translation as the Revised Version states “Tamir in the wilderness, in the land of Judah”.

containing elements of the original nomadic peoples, Mesopotamian and Iranian cultures, as well as Roman, a unique phenomenon where East met West.

The collapse of the Nabataean Empire at the end of the first century C.E. saw the Nabatean's control over the desert caravan routes relinquished and taken up by Palmyra due to its geographical position. As Rome grew so did its demands; luxuries such as spice, aromatics, incense, and precious stones were required, all of which passed through Palmyra on route to Rome. The "Silk Road" route ran 5 000 miles across the Asian continent, through Persia and on to Palmyra. Merchants coming with incense, spices, and bolts of silk and those returning with pistachios, dates, and Roman saffron all paid taxes on their goods and utilised the services that Palmyra offered. From Palmyra, the merchants could turn towards Rome in the north-east or to Egypt in the south, both lucrative markets. The entire city then revolved around trade.¹⁴

The most important luxury passing through Palmyra was silk, a closely guarded Chinese secret. The ability to manufacture silk was discovered in China around 3 000 B.C.E.¹⁵ and reached Rome approximately at the end of the republican era. Once there the elite of Rome instantly coveted it as a sign of wealth and power. Old fashioned Romans may have scorned it as an effeminate luxury but with Eastern influence in Rome gaining ascendancy and the empire growing so did the demand for silk. The city of Palmyra grew exponentially as the volume of silk passing through its gates increased. Soon it began to resemble a Roman city with a metropolis whose architecture was influenced by that of Rome, with monumental arches, Corinthian colonnades, and temples.

Palmyra became incorporated into the Roman province of Syria either during the reign of Tiberius or shortly after and continued to grow in importance to Rome. The

¹⁴ The stone inscribed "Palmyrene Tax Law" discovered in 1881 gives some indication of the vast range and extent of the goods traded through Palmyra and therefore subject to local taxation (Winsbury 2010:43).

¹⁵ Silkworm cocoons have been discovered and dated in northern China from between 2600 and 2300 B.C.E., yet a recent archaeological find of a small ivory cup decorated with a silkworm design has been dated to being between 6000 and 7000 years old (Silkroad Foundation 2000). The actual discovery of silk was, according to tradition, accidentally by a princess of the imperial house named His-Ling-Shih about 2460 B.C.E. and remained a closely guarded secret of the Chinese emperors.

earliest archaeological record is that of a dated Roman milestone east of the city reflecting 75 C.E.¹⁶ After visiting the city in 129 C.E., the emperor Hadrian renamed it *Palmyra Hadriana*, proclaiming it a free city. In 211/212 C.E., it became a *colonia* and acquired the *ius italicum* along with the cities of Tyre, Laodicea, Emesa, and Heliopolis, and thus became exempt from paying taxes to the empire under either the emperor Severus or, more probably, Caracalla. From that point onwards the once nomadic, now sedentary people of the desert flourished, bolstered by Palmyra's extensive trading capabilities, Rome's stable currency, its favoured status, and a common market that stretched throughout the Mediterranean. The second and third centuries C.E. heralded in the golden age of Palmyra as it benefited from its acquired exceptional status.

The eastern frontier of the empire had no clearly defined border, rather the Syrian Desert acted as one. Although Palmyra profited and became rich and powerful from the caravan trade itself, it was in the protection of these caravans that its true wealth accumulated. Keeping control over this desert trade became the city's major focus. Mesopotamian influences can still be seen in surviving artwork and everywhere there are images of those camels that made it possible for the caravans to cross those vast stretches of desert. Because of its unique position, Palmyra was influenced by many cultures, all of which were reflected in all aspects, dress, architecture, language, and customs but with a strongly Roman character (Stoneman 2003:27).

Throughout all this, Palmyra remained a city independent of foreign rule despite being firmly entrenched between powerful neighbouring empires, the Roman and the Sassanid Persian. Acting as a buffer state between Rome and the Parthian Empire, a Roman garrison was installed to counteract the influences of the Parthians. This left the Palmyrans free to concentrate on trade. The harmony enjoyed between Palmyra and Rome over the centuries of the early empire may have indeed hinged on Rome's liberal taxation policies that promoted free trade and private enterprise.

¹⁶ A milestone of Trajan's father, who is thus proved to have built a road from Palmyra to Sura on the Euphrates in the reign of Vespasian, makes clear that Roman territory at this time stretched well to the east of Palmyra (Stoneman 2003:27).

But by Zenobia's time, Palmyra was experiencing a serious financial setback. When the new rulers of Persia, the Sassanids, occupied the mouth of the Tigris and the Euphrates and closed Palmyra's caravan route in 227 C.E., trade began to diminish as they intermittently blocked Palmyra's lifeline, the Silk Road. This helped shape the course of Zenobia's stratospheric trajectory into history and legend as queen of the East.

Life in Palmyra was not initially crushed with its queen; Aurelian spared the city leaving a garrison behind whilst he returned to Rome for his triumph, only to return again to deal harshly with another uprising in 273 C.E., permitting a large-scale massacre of the inhabitants, plunder of the Temple of Bel, and a city left in ruins. The fate of Palmyra was of slow decline, no longer a glittering jewel in the east but a mere link in the fortifications of the *Strata Diocletiana* attested by inscriptions and the headquarters of the prefect of the *Legio I Illyricorum* (Kaizer 2010:114). There are differing academic opinions on the long-term fate of Palmyra. "The defeat of Zenobia and later the sack of Palmyra by the Roman army obviously marked the end of a certain period in the history of the city. On the one hand, the ancient writers presented it as a disaster, but on the other hand epigraphical sources suggest a certain continuity in functioning of the town" (Kowalski 1997:41, 57).¹⁷

ZENOBIA THE NAME

Zenobia is the name with which modern audiences can identify but in the ancient sources there are numerous variations that exist, particularly when one looks at the Arab, Jewish, Manichean, and Roman sources, both literary and epigraphic. As the daughter of an Arab chieftain whose cognomen was *Aurelia*, the suggestion is that the family had been Roman citizens for probably at least a century. Arab sources state that she was an Arab queen called Na'ila and her father, known as 'Amr ibn Zarib, was the chief of the 'Amalqi or 'Amalaqi tribe.¹⁸ In the Arab histories she is also known as

¹⁷ Arabic sources totally ignore the fact that the Romans defeated Zenobia and destroyed Palmyra and instead focus on the inter-Arab aspect of the struggle (Rihan 2014:31).

¹⁸ Ball (2002:78) quoting al-Tabari.

Naila, Layla, Maysun, and Tadmur (Zahran 2010:150). She appears in medieval Arabic traditions and stories as al-Zabba' but is most likely to have been conflated with other heroic Arab queens (Southern 2008:12; Rihan 2014:31).

Queen Tadi is the name cited in Manichaean documents along with that of Nafsha. Nafsha though was also the name of her purported sister, whose very existence is disputed, and there may well be confusion as a result (Southern 2008:2). In Palmyran script, she is Zenobia,¹⁹ that translates as (*sptmy'btzby*), Septimia Bat-Zabbai. On her coinage, she is known as Septimia Zenobia Sebaste. The name Septimia, from all epigraphic evidence, may well have been bestowed on her by her husband.

ZENOBIA THE WOMAN

It is believed that Zenobia was born around 240/241 C.E. but this is unproven and it appears to be based on assumptions rather than hard fact concerning her origins and her family, as well as a certain amount of given logic. Nothing whatsoever is recorded or even known about her mother. Just as little is attested about her father; neither his political nor his social standing can be confirmed.

The historian Al Tabari claims her father was the sheikh of the 'Amlaqi, whilst, according to scriptures, his Roman name was Julius Aurelius Zenobius and his Greek name Antiochus,²⁰ confusion continues as according to the HA his name was actually Achilles and his usurper was named Antiochus (Zos. 1.60.2). All of this uncertainty and speculation gives further grist to the mill of legend and invention on the life of Zenobia.

In his Arabic *History of prophets and kings* written in the tenth century C.E., Al-Tabari alleges that on the death of her father, Amr Ibn Zarib, Zenobia assumed control of the tribe and led them on their nomadic wanderings for seasonal pasturage, a

¹⁹ "One whose life derives from Zeus".

²⁰ On three milestones, written in Palmyrene, Zenobia is described as the daughter of Antiochus, '*bt 'ntywkws*'. Speculation abounds if this is a flowery version of a claim to ancestry rather than a direct father-daughter connection, possibly part of her tenuous claim to Ptolemaic and Seleucid ancestry as a descendant of Antiochos IV Epiphanes of Syria who was married to Cleopatra Thea.

remarkable accomplishment given that she was probably still a teenage girl in a decidedly paternalistic society (Weingarten 2008). If this is in fact true, it would explain her more “manly” abilities, such as riding, enduring long marches, as well as her ability to assume command.

Zenobia was able to speak Egyptian, and additionally, there is her famous claim that she was directly descended from Cleopatra and the Ptolemies, hence the further assumption that her mother may well have been Egyptian. This claim of famous ancestry though may be as a result of confusion with Cleopatra Thea, the “other Cleopatra”. The truths of her ancestry are deliberately clouded by her own claims of affinities to Dido, Semiramis, Cleopatra, and other Macedonian kings of that region.²¹

She boasted herself to be of the family of the Cleopatras and the Ptolemies (Hist Aug. *Tyr. Trig.* 30.2).

Once again, despite verbal and pictorial, both recent and ancient, representations we do not know what Zenobia looked like, any more than we really do for example Cleopatra or Boudicca. Lack of trustworthy information gives free rein to tales that in turn lend themselves to legend (Watson 2004:57). Most writers and artists have looked to stories in the HA, written retrospectively, for their inspiration, where there is a glowing picture of her as a beautiful and noble woman.²²

Classical and Arabic sources describe Zenobia as being even more beautiful than Cleopatra, claiming that she was beautiful and intelligent, with a dark complexion, pearly white teeth, and bright black eyes, differing though in that she had reputation for extreme chastity with no taint of scandal. Sources also describe Zenobia as carrying herself like a man, riding, hunting, and drinking on occasion with her officers in a stark contrast to the concept that Oriental women were supposedly lax and voluptuous. Well educated supposedly trilingual, fluent in Greek, Aramaic, and

²¹ There is no evidence in Egyptian coinage or papyri or even other ancient literature to substantiate the claim (Hartmann 2001).

²² See Wayne (1987:48) for an illuminating study of the process by which women still in Medieval and Renaissance texts “were sometimes damned not with faint praise, but with extensive and effusive adulation ... affirming an association of strength and virtue with men and masculinity”.

Egyptian, with a working knowledge of Latin, she is supposed to have hosted literary salons and to have surrounded herself with philosophers and poets, cultivating intellectualism.

Her face was dark and of a swarthy hue, her eyes were black and powerful beyond the usual wont, her spirit divinely great, and her beauty incredible. So white were her teeth that many thought that she had pearls in place of teeth (Hist Aug. *Tyr. Trig.* 30.15).

Arab tradition, alternatively, according to Al-Qazwīni, gives her blue eyes and hair so long and luxurious that it trailed on the ground behind her (Al-Qazwīni 1958:424; Hadas 1958:135).²³ Granted, much of this physical description may be in keeping with the expectations of the look of the Syrian Desert Arabs. Coinage of that time is of no help as she is represented as a somewhat dowdy, un-prepossessing person, yet the same can be said about the coinage of Cleopatra VII.

ZENOBIA AND ODAENATHUS

Assumptions are made that Zenobia married Septimius Odaenathus, a distant member of her tribe, although it is not known at what point this happened. Although Zenobia made a good marriage vis-à-vis wealth, prestige, and influence, this was also true for Odaenathus. If he was king of Palmyra when he married Zenobia or became so soon after is not clear. As a descendant of the chiefs of one of the desert tribes, she strengthened Odaenathus' position; this was probably the original reason for the marriage (Southern 2008:9). Alternatively, this may merely be part of her mythical ancestry in the Arab tradition.

Zenobia was Odaenathus' second wife, which is clear from references to a son, Herodes,²⁴ who was grown and designated his heir and clearly indicated as not being the son of Zenobia. There is no information on Odaenathus' first wife, if she was dead

²³ See also Equini Schneider (2001:23–25).

²⁴ Also referred to as Herodian.

or divorced, not even her name or even how many children they had is known. Only the one son is mentioned, who shared Odaenathus' powers as exarch²⁵ in 251 C.E.

A son, Vaballathus Atheonodorus, was born to Zenobia between 258 and 260 C.E. Vaballathus was also given the names Julius Aurelius but no confirmation exists that Zenobia was also known as Julia Aurelia. The number of children Zenobia and Odaenathus had is hotly disputed, ranging from the positive confirmation of Vaballathus²⁶ and one other, to possibly an additional five based on names mentioned in the "Lives of the thirty pretenders": "Mother of L. Iulius Aurelius Septimius Vaballathus Atheonodorus" (*IGR* III 1027-8, V. Aur. 38) and "of Septimius Antiochus" (*IGR* III 1029). The problem here is that the Palmyran and their equivalent Latinised names are thought to have been classified as separate children.

ODAENATHUS' RISE TO POWER

In 255 C.E., 'Udaynath, or Septimius Odaenathus, as he was known in Latin, was appointed governor of Syria Phoenice, based in Palmyra. How exactly the family of 'Udaynath/Odaenathus rose to the position of supreme power in Palmyra is neither known nor recorded. It is assumed that the family originally belonged to the tribal elite or council which ruled Palmyra at the time. Members of these wealthy families acquired great power and through this came to the attention of Rome, which resulted in the conferring of Roman rank and status (Ball 2000:77). In inscriptions he is mentioned as a chief or sheik. Prior to his "election", it would appear that Palmyra had no royal family or traditional dynasty; most probably tribal or mercantile elders on a council headed by magistrates ruled it till then. It fitted quite neatly into the concept of a massive business enterprise or mercantile republic. Five years later, in 260 C.E., he was made, according to some, *dux Orientis*, Governor of the East.

These titles awarded to him would have been more of a reward or acknowledgment titles from Rome. Yet they may well be false assumptions, as they

²⁵ A governor of a distant province under the Byzantine emperors.

²⁶ Vaballathus' existence is proven from minted coinage.

were not formal Roman titles. It is suggested, though, that many of these, including the later “King of Kings”,²⁷ were awarded only after his death and were intended to boost the status of his son Vaballathus and by extension Zenobia. Agathias indicates that Odaenathus was at first unknown and obscure, but won great fame as a result of the disasters he inflicted on Sapor (Agathias 12.27).

The Persians had become bolder as the Roman Empire suffered a near economic and political collapse. In a 50-year period Rome saw roughly two dozen emperors seize power and almost all were assassinated or defeated in battle by their successors. As a result, Rome’s economy faltered and its borders were no longer well defended. Taking advantage, the Persians under Shapur I (Sapor) advanced into Syria and plundered the land. In his memoirs, Shapur boasted of defeating a Roman army at Barbalissos and killing 60 000 Romans; the current emperor Valerian suffered the ignominy of being captured alive and supposedly dying a gruesome death (Dodgeon and Lieu 1991:50).

Gallienus, the son of the captured and now dead Roman emperor, seemed both unwilling and unable to retaliate against the encroaching Persians, and so Odaenathus, Zenobia’s husband, the king of Palmyra, drove them back across the empire’s borders. Odaenathus’ motives may well have been double-pronged: loyalty to Rome and protecting Palmyra, and by extension, his interests against the Persian interference along the Silk Road. Therefore, it does appear that Odaenathus was playing a double game with Rome, something that goes part way to explaining the future impetuous actions of Zenobia. In reality, Odaenathus was as much a threat to the throne of Rome and the emperor Gallienus as were the other thirty usurpers or pretenders, as the title of the *Historia Augusta* suggests.

In return Odaenathus was made first governor of Syria and shortly afterwards governor of the eastern part of the empire. Emboldened, Odaenathus, now styling himself *shah-shahna* or “King of Kings”, drove the Persians even further back towards what is now Baghdad. He rallied what was left of the Roman troops, combining them with his force from Palmyra and pursued the Persian troops

²⁷ King of Kings was a Persian title formally held by Shapur I who Odaenathus defeated (Goldsworthy 2009).

withdrawing down the Euphrates. He was able to capture some of their baggage, some of the booty they had plundered, and according to rumour, even part of Shapur's harem.

Of Zenobia at this time little is said other than the fact that she had accompanied her husband on his Persian campaigns along with their two sons and the king's heir by his previous wife. This in itself was considered an unusual event, virtually unprecedented in Roman culture and certainly in the East. Zenobia was beginning to show her mettle, being able to withstand the hardships of a military march across the Syrian Desert with two small children in tow. The HA now identifies her as a formidable woman in a military context.

Although Gallienus had bestowed on Odeanathus the title of Emperor of the entire East, Odeanathus did not have long to savour his victories. His military actions had made him popular with his people and those in the surrounding environs, but evidently not to all. In late 267 to mid-268 C.E., Odeanathus was assassinated under mysterious circumstances, along with his eldest and favourite son Herodes, in either Emesa or Cappadocia, leaving Zenobia a widow before presumably she was thirty years old. Zosimus maintains that "he lost his life by a conspiracy as he was celebrating the birth-day of a friend" (Zos 1.21).

WICKED STEPMOTHER OR PLOTTING POLITICAL INTRIGUER

The stories that surround this are plentiful and are cloaked in sinister mystery. The only feature that can be agreed upon is that his death was undeniably a murder and at the hands of an assassin, but the who, the how, and the why remains unresolved. The ever inconsistent HA offers explanations that range from a family affair with dynastic overtones, with or without Zenobia being involved or complicit, political intrigue involving Rome, and parricide involving a nephew or cousin and loss of pride (Watson 2004:58). One version of the history of Zenobia is to be found in Chaucer's *The monk's tale*, lines 2247-3564, where she is portrayed as the warrior queen, famous for her beauty and her ambition. Some have suspected her of being something of a

Lady Macbeth in plotting her own husband's death. Zenobia was allegedly intolerant of Odaenathus' first son as he was a prince of higher rank than her son and was marked for dynastic succession.

On the death of her husband, Zenobia needed to consolidate her position if Vaballathus was to inherit his father's position and Palmyra was to continue to retain its regional hegemony (Watson 2004:59). Odaenathus' position had been built up on a personal level with his subjects and contemporaries over a period of time, his original plan of succession was no more and Zenobia therefore had to act. The major problem here was that her son Vaballathus was a minor, he was still under the age of two, and she had to act as regent, which she did by taking the titles of Queen and Mother of the King.

Once again, the censure of a women assuming power is presented in the choice of vocabulary used:

She held the imperial power in the name of her son ... ruling longer than could be endured from one of the female sex (*Hist Aug. Tyr. Trig.* 30.103).

She retained those advisors who had been close to her husband and thus avoided upsetting them and at the same time ensuring continuity. Zenobia quickly stepped into the power vacuum that was left, ruling nominally through her young son. First, she consolidated her position, and then once she had a firm grasp on her deceased husband's power and authority over the Palmyrans, she began to extend her authority in the east, culminating in the annexation of Egypt.

Taking advantage of the chaos throughout the empire, Zenobia dispatched the Palmyran army south to Egypt in 269 C.E. A variety of epigraphic evidence confirms her forays into Egypt in the form of milestones bearing the name of her son, Vaballathus, which in its turn is backed up with papyrological evidence and through Zosimus 1.44 (Nakamura 1993:135). Again there are conflicting versions: did Zenobia seize an unexpected opportunity or was this part of a vast plan hatched earlier by Odaenathus? Either way, it was not an easy victory. The Palmyrans seized control of Alexandria and were then driven out. In a fatal error, the governor of Alexandria tried

to chase them back to Syria. Familiar with the desert terrain, Zenobia²⁸ went on the attack and won a decisive victory. Again through her son she was now queen of Egypt. Inscriptions and coinage found from that date grant the title of king to Vaballathus and refer to Zenobia as queen and the mother of the king.

Gallienus at this point was focused on the north and to the west; his reaction to Zenobia is unrecorded. Gallienus was murdered by a cabal of his own generals and was succeeded by Claudius II who died of a fever in early 270 C.E., only to be succeeded by his brother Quintillus who only held power for a few months. Following this, Aurelian seized power, becoming emperor during the “third-century crisis”, ruling from 270–275 C.E., a period of time when the empire was close to disintegration. Aurelian was one who is credited with putting it back together (Winsbury 2010:26).

By the early part of the 270s, Zenobia was more or less entrenched as ruler of an area that stretched from Egypt to modern-day Turkey and as far east as Baghdad. She was minting coins, issuing edicts and controlling vital trade routes in the empire, including the shipments of grain from the bread basket of Egypt directly to Rome. Previous emperors may have been too embattled to check her power grab, but Aurelian was a different story; it was Zenobia’s misfortune to have to face him in battle. One of the central problems in assessing the role that Zenobia played in the revolt against Rome is that there is very little documented history about the events that occurred and those documents that do exist reflect some questionable accounts (Ball 2000:79).

Having consolidated her power and seized Egypt, Zenobia was in power, although nominally and according to convention through her son. Not wishing to openly antagonise the new emperor or break with Rome totally, the *antoniniani* and *tetradrachms* from the imperial mints at Antioch and Alexandria from this era reflected Vaballathus and Aurelian as joint rulers of Egypt.²⁹ In Palmyra, inscriptions

²⁸ There is a distinct lack of confirmed evidence that Zenobia herself ever set foot in Egypt, therefore for Zenobia can be read Zenobia’s army.

²⁹ Aurelian is awarded his full titles including *imperator* and wears the radiate crown whilst Vaballathus has no titles. However, another argument maintains that the mint mark is on the side of Aurelian, indicating that this is to be considered the reverse and by extension

put Vaballathus and Aurelian on relatively equal footing. Perhaps she thought Aurelian would ignore her grab for power as long as she attempted to placate him through numismatic diplomacy by including his name on coins and papyri, and so she maintained the convenient fiction of co-rulership. But she soon pushed the boundaries, and in the move that decided Rome, she declared herself as Augusta and her son as Augustus,³⁰ something that had previously been the exclusive sole domain of the imperial family.³¹

This greatly perturbed the Romans, who viewed such actions as rebellion. At the same time, she continued with her expansionism, conquering parts of Anatolia and the Lebanon; historic sources say this was done through wile and guise without, it would appear, the use of armed force. As a Roman of eastern heritage, the widow of a highly respected ruler, she could appeal to those communities dissatisfied with the yoke of Roman domination. She, with the backing of Palmyran wealth, offered some measure of stability versus the turbulent times of the Roman Empire. Flushed with success, Zenobia was entrenched as queen by early 270s, the ruler of an area the equivalent to a third of the Roman Empire.

THE END OF ZENOBIA

Initially, Aurelian had enough to occupy himself with the Scythians and the Germanic hordes that he did not immediately turn his attention to Zenobia. After assuaging Rome about foreign invasions and defeating the others, he then turned to the emerging

Vaballathus is shown on the obverse, the superior position (Southern 2008:106). This progressed to coins reflecting a bearded and crowned Aurelian and a beardless Vaballathus, styled “most distinguished man”, “king” of Palmyra, “victorious general” (*imperator*), and “leader of the Romans” (*dux Romanum*), in essence presenting the boy as Aurelian’s junior co-emperor (Galsworthy 2009).

³⁰ Before declaring herself Augusta, she bestowed the title of *rex regnum* on her son as well as Odeanathus’ old title of *Corrector Totius Orientis*. Many scholars have drawn a direct comparison with Cleopatra and Agrippina Minor who tried to establish their own dynasties (Southern 2008:1–2; Potter 2004:267; Stoneman 1994:18).

³¹ This act is attested in various coin types minted by the official mints in Antioch and Alexandria circa 272 C.E., *tetradrachms* in the names of Vaballathus and Zenobia, as *Augustus* and *Augusta*, respectively were issued (Watson 2004:69).

Syrian problem. When war finally erupted between Rome and Zenobia, there were two objectives: to liberate those parts of the Empire which Zenobia had claimed for Palmyra; and the second being her elimination and the reduction of Palmyra's power (Watson 2004:70).

Reports of Aurelian's actions can be found in HA but once again, and this time on the grounds of logic, they are disputed with regard to accuracy. Barring this there is little on the actual campaign that was concluded in just a few weeks, culminating in the decisive battle at Emesa, modern-day Homs in Western Syria. Aurelian's well-trained troops defeated Zenobia's troops thanks to decisive action, rather than divine intervention, as is intimated in the less pragmatic HA. Pursuing her across the Syrian Desert, the Roman army laid siege to Palmyra. Zenobia was captured attempting to escape by bactrian camel trying to cross the Euphrates and was brought back to Aurelian who, though merciful, would not tolerate dissent or rebellion. The skeleton of this story is confirmed through the account of Zosimus.

There are three main versions detailing the end of Zenobia; obviously, some are inventions, if not all three, and there are variations on some.³² One maintains that she was indeed paraded in Aurelian's triumphal procession through the streets of Rome in golden chains. This is the version given most credence by the more modern artists and writers. In some versions she meets the traditional fate of strangulation³³ after the triumph, as was the fate of many captives, and yet in others she is not executed. Instead, she was awarded a retirement villa in Tivoli where she lived for the rest of her natural life. Once resident she was then purportedly married to a Roman senator and had several children by him³⁴ (Eutr. 9.13.2). The second maintains that she was indeed

³² Limited credibility is afforded to the claim by 'Amr ibn 'Adi, a nephew of Jadhima a Tanukh sheikh defeated and killed by Zenobia, that he actually killed the Palmyrene queen to avenge his uncle after allying himself with Aurelian. See Tabari, *Tarikh al-Tabari*, 1 621–627 quoted in Graf (1989).

³³ Malalas recounts a public humiliation that ended in her beheading after the triumph having previously been paraded through a variety of eastern cities (Southern 2008:159 citing Malalas 12.20).

³⁴ Jerome and Eutropius make mention of descendants of the Queen during the fourth and fifth centuries but the connections are tentative. Zonaras proffers the suggestion that Aurelian married one of her several daughters, something dismissed by Southern (2008:160).

put on public display in chains but that this happened in Antioch and not in Rome. It is suggested by some historians that the concept of the golden chains is just a literary cliché, as “the motif of the oriental queen who can barely carry the weight of her gemstones was a familiar *topos* in contemporary [Roman] novels and rhetoric” (Dignas and Winter 2007:162).

A third version states that she never even reached Rome, dying en route by refusing to eat or because of some unnamed illness, adding that almost all the Palmyran prisoners were drowned. This is the version that is related by Zosimos: “It is said, however, that Zenobia died either from disease or by refusing to eat and that all the others, save her son, were drowned in the crossing from Chalcedon to Byzantium” (Zos. 1.29). This “suicide” version is reflected also in the Arabic sources where she is said to have sucked her poisoned ring rather than die at another’s hand. Of course, this is all very reminiscent of the end of Cleopatra VII who took her own life rather than be humiliated by the Romans. In *Aurelian* (27.3) it is said that Zenobia wrote in a “fictitious” letter in response to Aurelian: “You demand my surrender as though you were not aware that Cleopatra preferred to die a Queen rather than remain alive, however high her rank”.

ZENOBIA AND HER LEGACY

The romantic figure of Zenobia shrouded in fantasy and legend has lived on and inspired many an imagination through the ages. She has taken on so many different personas through time and space that some scholars have doubted that the stories or legends all belong to the same person, resulting in a discrepancy between Zenobia, Queen of Palmyra/Tadmur and al-Zabba, Queen of the Arab tribes in northern Syria (Zahran 2010:146).

In the West she became more attractive as the centuries progressed. Chaucer wrote of her in his *Monk’s tale*; Giovanni Boccaccio included her in his book *Concerning famous women*³⁵ along with Penthesilea, Artemesia, and Cleopatra; Sir Thomas Elyot

³⁵ In praising women, Boccaccio continues to reinforce a male value system and reproaches women generally.

wrote of her in *Defence of good women*,³⁶ and Gibbon referred to her in a mix of admiration and chauvinism, “Zenobia is perhaps the only female, whose superior genius broke through the servile indolence imposed on her sex by the climate and manners of Asia” (Gibbon 2005:313). Lady Hester Stanhope’s visit in 1813 to Palmyra, in which she believed she was the reincarnation of Zenobia, made the queen the idol of the Victorian age, whilst the tsarina Catherine I (Catherine the Great 1762–1796) likened herself to Zenobia and tried to rival the supposed splendour of her court in combination with military might. She is remembered in poetry, books,³⁷ plays,³⁸ and operas,³⁹ as well as sculpture⁴⁰ and painting.⁴¹

Arab and Syrian scholars such as Shahid (1984:152) and Altheim (1965:251) believe the revolt to be the forerunner of the Arab expansion of the Caliphate, and as such it is used extensively as a theme in Syrian nationalism (Nakamura 1993:133). In the East, she is a figure of legend told to every Arab schoolchild until they can recite the poetry she allegedly uttered when the caravans carrying disguised soldiers entered the city of Palmyra which ultimately led to her suicide rather than death at the hands of Umar b. ‘Adi (Zahran 2010:152). Certainly, the Arabic legends and traditions seem almost fantastic and unreal at times, even tracing her lineage back to the Queen of Sheba and further even to Adam. Yet they must not be considered devoid of any historical value, as at a minimum, they confirm her very existence and confirm her ambitious drive for an Arab empire.

There can be many explanations proffered for these discrepancies, deriving from the little information preserved in Persian sources, as this would have stained Persian

³⁶ A eulogy of Anne of Cleves disguised as a biography of Zenobia of Palmyra and written in 1540.

³⁷ William Ware published *Zenobia, Queen of Palmyra*, a tale of the Roman Empire in the days of the Emperor Aurelian in 1892.

³⁸ Aldemario Tegisto wrote the play *Zenobia Regina di Palmira* in 1785; in 1995 Nick Dear’s play *Zenobia* was performed with the Royal Shakespeare Company.

³⁹ Rossini wrote the opera *Aureliano in Palmiro* about Aurelian and Zenobia in 1813; Tomaso Albinoni wrote *Zenobia, Regina di Palmireni* in 1694.

⁴⁰ Harriet Hosmer’s 1859 celebrated statue *Zenobia in chains*.

⁴¹ Giovanni Battista Tiepolo devoted a series of paintings to Aurelian and Zenobia in the early eighteenth century for the Zenobia family of Venice; Herbert Gustave Schmalz painted *Queen Zenobia’s last look upon Palmyra*.

reputation and required an admittance of the defeat of Sapor at the hands of her husband in 260 and 266 C.E. Thus, as Zahran (2010:149) so succinctly states, “Arab historians from the eighth century onwards had their histories coloured by Persia against Rome”. Many of the Arab legends were also oral and by that very nature filled with anecdotes, embellishments, proverbs, and even poetry.

Further, there is the expected treatment of a female ruler from the male-dominated and chauvinistic Roman world of the third century C.E., where they were subject to “the two overlapping chauvinisms of race and sex” (Hughes-Hallett 1997:15). To our modern interpretations, the *Historia Augusta* presents a picture of a strong, competent woman in parts. Nevertheless, to the Roman reader, with their inherent aversion to powerful women, there is censure written into the lines. When assessing the bias applied, it is important to realise what the primary concerns and goals of the writer were at that time. Many ancient historians had political points of view and personal opinions about the times of which they wrote. In some cases, this bias is well suppressed and in others, it is quite clear.

In the life of Aurelian, the bias towards Zenobia changes tack. Because Aurelian was considered a successful and heroic leader whose wars were justifiable, Zenobia is presented as proud, insolent, cowardly, and guilt-ridden, as well a treacherous person who allied herself with the enemies of Rome, namely Persia (Southern 2008:12). Several serious charges have been made against her character, the most spurious being the one of cowardice. When captured, Aurelian’s soldiers felt that she should be executed, she then purportedly blamed her political and military aspirations and moves on advice given to her by her closest advisors, with the result that whilst she survived they were executed. This is in opposition to the previous picture created of her, that she was brave and resourceful, more so even than her husband, Odaenathus:

Aurelian, however, with the true spirit of an emperor, at once performed two notable deeds, one of which showed his severity, the other his leniency (*Hist Aug. Aur.* 23.1).

It was not possible to suggest that Aurelian would demean himself by fighting and conquering a mere woman⁴² and therefore the Palmyrans were built up as renowned fighters and being many in number, they were a worthy force (Southern 2008:12).

Zenobia was not the first foreign woman to lead men into armed conflict, and her predecessors more than likely had a significant impact on her reputation. Ancient historians suggest Zenobia was aware of the power of these historical queens and evoked their memories in order to enhance her standing. Zenobia served her purpose in history for the Roman historians, to some, linking her denigrated their reputations and, whilst bolstering the prestige of one emperor, Aurelian, it was illustrated that she was an enemy of Rome. Little did they realise that they were laying the foundations for the prototype for the women warriors who in later years helped to weave the fraught history of the Middle East and elsewhere.

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⁴² This is further reinforced by the “masculinisation” of Zenobia in the narrative, likening her to an Amazon queen. In the HA she was said to have a clear but masculine voice with the swarthy complexion of a man. Her behaviour was masculine in that she dressed as an emperor rather than a lady and was attended by eunuchs and not serving girls, she rode on horseback, marched and drank with the officers (Watson 2004:86)

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