

Palmyra, the Roman Empire, and the Third Century Crisis: Zooming in and Scaling up from the Evidence by Raja R and Seland EH

2025. 323 pages. ISBN 978-3-515-14021-8. No price quoted.

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The third century of the Common Era (CE) was a time of transition and transformation within the Roman Empire and its neighbours in the Middle East. Palmyra in the Syrian desert was one such place, particularly during the third century CE, especially under the reign of Zenobia, the Queen of the Empire (267–272CE). Palmyra existed at an interstice of global focus (the Roman Near East) both geographically and chronologically. Although it experienced a crisis, scholarly debate continues on whether this presents a threat or an opportunity.

Here we have a collection of evidence-based studies that begin with the notion of “crisis” in the region and focus on military and religious developments. The second section considers the role of Palmyra in the broader context of the Iranian-Mesopotamian world. The final section considers in broad terms the Roman Near East and, more particularly, developments in Palmyra. The primary methodology employed here is that of archaeological excavations as the authors investigate military, economic, political, cultural, and religious developments.

The significance of Palmyra in the third century fluctuated with the downfall as a result of the revolt under Zenobia, “the queen of the Empire,” and the changing role of Palmyra in terms of the magnitude and direction of its key location. This was a prelude to the expansion and dominance of Arabia in succeeding centuries. Palmyra did not exist independently of its broader context during the third century and was subject to the transformation of imperial structures. This offers a positive interpretation.

If we focus on the religious situation, we note a transition in what might be described as a pluralistic and fluid situation. There were several community-oriented group faiths, including Christianity, which alone was not linked to the imperial cult. These faiths included Mithras, polytheistic faiths, Dionysus, Manicheism, Zoroastrianism (for a time



Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae
2026 | # 22028 | 2 pages

<https://doi.org/10.25159/2412-4265/22028>

ISSN 2412-4265 (Online)

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the dominant faith), Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and there was evidence in written religious and liturgical texts.

Changing economics altered the frequency of monuments being erected due to cost implications. Military migrations also altered the volume of followers of faiths, which demonstrated both continuity and transition. A great deal is made of archaeological artefacts, such as funerary tombs and rites, but this takes no account of the fact, for instance, that the Christians constituted a poor class who suffered regular persecution and provided negligible archaeological (see Dirven 223–232). By comparison, Palmyra was dominated by the aristocratic and middle classes who could afford such ostentatious monuments. However, while Christianity could not meet the archaeological criteria, apart from examples of domestic architecture, it did produce literary liturgical sources in Aramaic and Hebrew.

This book is clearly for the specialist, but it offers interesting perspectives on the rise and fall of the Roman and other empires during the third century CE. One thing becomes clear: the military, economic, political, social, cultural, and religious dimensions are interlinked, and all contributed to the third century “crisis” that was evident throughout the Roman world and resulted in the greater fortification of Palmyra as well as other transformations, including Christianisation, which led to her survival into Late Antiquity, after the demise of Zenobia.