

**Gary Watson, *Palmyra's Roman Revolution: How Rome
Enabled the Palmyrene Empire***

Durham University, gary.t.watson@durham.ac.uk

It is during the reign of another powerful eastern queen who ruled under Rome's aegis, Cleopatra VII (and last) of Egypt, that Palmyra first features in Roman history. The first interaction between the two cities is described in Appian's history as a raid on Palmyra, which was carried out by Cleopatra's consort, Mark Antony, in around 41 BC.¹ This is somewhat ironic as the whole episode of Antony and Cleopatra illustrates how Rome could and often did depend on subject nations to carry out the administration of the empire on its behalf. Antony ruled the east at once as a Roman magistrate but also a consort of Cleopatra, and many at that time (and since) have wondered, perhaps encouraged, not a little, by Augustan propaganda, who really held power in the east: the Roman magistrate or the Egyptian queen.² The passage from Appian is revealing as it shows that Palmyra was not subject to the Roman empire at this point. And yet, ironically, over two centuries later, it was this very city that would produce another eastern queen, who also took the reins of Roman power in the east, and for whom Cleopatra may have

¹ Appian *B Civ.* 5.1.9.

² E.g. Dio 50.4.1 and Plutarch *Ant.* 58.

served as a model: Zenobia.³ The latter was a central player in an episode that is just as illustrative as that of Antony and Cleopatra: the rise of Odenathus and the so-called Palmyrene Empire of Zenobia and Vaballathus. To understand how this episode came about, it is important to understand how Palmyra came to be within, and play a prominent role within, the Roman empire.

Palmyra and Rome: A Tale of two Cities

Palmyra seems to have only succeeded in prospering as a trading centre due to Rome's success in bringing the *pax Romana* to the east. The question of exactly when Palmyra came under Roman power is unclear. But the city's trade was evidently important to Rome during Tiberius' reign, when Germanicus visited the city in AD 19 and set its trade tariffs.⁴ This incident would suggest not only that the trade was becoming important to Rome (and was likely flourishing) but also that Palmyra was in some way subject to Roman power. At this same time, Germanicus also used a Palmyrene man as an ambassador to neighbouring Characene/Mesene.⁵ This state, which lay on the Persian Gulf, was a satrap of the Parthian Empire (although it briefly came under Roman power after Trajan's Parthian campaign, c. AD 115) and was (or became) extremely important to Palmyrene trade. In which case who would be better than a Palmyrene as an ambassador? Someone who likely knew the region and its trade routes, and perhaps had contacts in Characene, which would make them a more effective ambassador. It shows, even at this

³ Some sources state she claimed descent from Cleopatra, e.g. *SHA Tyr. Trig.* 27 and 30. But there is no direct evidence.

⁴ *PAT* 0259.

⁵ *PAT* 2754.

early stage, a Palmyrene acting on behalf of the Rome and getting involved in the business of empire.

It is certainly clear that the city had been incorporated into the empire by the reign of Hadrian, as the emperor visited the city and, with no small amount of vanity (infamously befitting him), renamed the city 'Hadriane Palmyra'.⁶ It seems the city had prospered and grown, since Germanicus' time, from a community that was made up of tribal groups that perhaps maintained strong connections with nomads of the Syrian desert, to a Hellenistic style city with the Roman empire. This can be seen in the growth of Hellenistic architecture, institutions and even terminology.⁷ It portrayed itself outwardly as a Greek city while still preserving an underlying unique character as desert trading city with a Semitic language and population. This unique character was, nonetheless, essential to Rome, as we shall see. The fact that the city took Hadrian's name may have been part of this, as Hadrian was famously keen to encourage Hellenistic styles and culture throughout the empire. But the city may have taken on a Roman identity by the Severan era (AD 193-235) when it was granted the status of *colonia*. The key word here is *status* because, by the time of the Severan emperors, the term *colonia* had ceased to signify a place where there was an actual colony of citizens or veterans and was simply a status-title (and perhaps one of the highest).⁸ The city in no way became a site for veteran settlement and does not seem to have

⁶ Stephanos Byz. *Eth.* s.v. Πάλμυρα. Shown in inscriptions, e.g. *PAT* 0247.

⁷ See fig. 1 and 2. These show Hellenistic architecture at Palmyra: Corinthian columns and a nymphaeum.

⁸ Millar 2006: 191-200.

been a satellite for Roman citizens.⁹ What this title did was to situate Palmyra within the empire as a prominent Roman city. The city even adopted Roman colonial forms: it had two leaders, or *duumviri* (*strategoi* in the Greek used by Palmyrenes), elected each year to govern the city. This Roman identity led to the city producing several senators from among its leading citizens, and also, later, allowed Odenathus to gain prominence as both a Palmyrene noble and a Roman senator. But, before we look at the rise of Odenathus, it is necessary to look at another aspect of Palmyra which paved the way for Odenathus: its unique position as a desert trading city.

A Trading Empire?

As the city prospered under the Roman peace, it becomes apparent that city was a major player in east-west trade. The main route used is now thought to be the road to Hit, which lies southeast of Palmyra on the Euphrates River.¹⁰ Here, trade, which Palmyra sent through the desert by caravan, would be directed south, by boat, to Characene/Mesene, where commercial goods were sent as far as India and China.¹¹ It is in this context that certain leading men from among the population come to prominence as protectors and sponsors of the caravan trade. The question of who exactly these leading figures were has sparked a debate as heated as the question of when the city came under Roman power.¹² There has been no resolution or consensus. What we see are inscriptions from in and around Palmyra, where figures are praised and

⁹ The citizenship would be granted to all freeborn male citizens of the empire by AD 212, which utterly diminished the significance of this aspect of becoming a *colonia*.

¹⁰ See map.

¹¹ For the route: Meyer and Seland 2016.

¹² For an overview: Sommer 2016: 11-13.

thanked by merchants for offering protection to them both at home, on the road, and abroad. These figures have been variously portrayed as a protector-warrior class, who emerged from tribal hierarchies, merchant princes, who dominated the markets, or simply ordinary merchants who took the initiative in protecting their fellows.¹³ One of the most prominent of these figures, who stands out from among the inscriptions, is a Palmyrene named Soados.¹⁴

Soados seems to have carried out the same task as other leading figures, i.e. protecting and sponsoring trade. But there is something unique about this figure, as he not only seems to have done this on a larger scale, but he also, apparently, had the backing and approval of the Roman provincial administration. In the following inscription, which was made in both Greek and Palmyrene-Semitic in AD 132, Soados is both backed and legitimised in his task, through letters and an edict, by none other than the governor of Syria:

‘...(The statue of) Soados, son of Boliades, son of Soados, [pious and] patriotic, and who on many [notable] occasions nobly and with [love of honour] supported the merchants, the caravans, and the citizens in Vologasias, and who always invested his life and wealth for his fatherland’s vital interests, and who because of this [has been adorned] with decrees, measures, public statues, and both letters and an edict of Publicius Marcellus, the most distinguished lord consular governor...’¹⁵

¹³ Will 1957; Yon 2002; Young 2001; respectively.

¹⁴ This is the Greek/Hellenised form of his Semitic name, So’adu.

¹⁵ *PAT* 0197. Translated in Andrade 2012: 78.

This shows that Rome was interested in and concerned with the success of Palmyrene trade. The inscription, which comes from the reign of Hadrian (AD 117-138), shows that Roman authorities were happy for the city to autonomously oversee trade and protect Rome's south-eastern desert frontier on their behalf. This is confirmed later from another inscription made in AD 145 (the reign of Antoninus Pius, AD 138-161), also in Greek and Palmyrene-Semitic, which describes how Soados, more prominent and successful than ever, had been backed and sponsored in his activities by the emperors Hadrian and Antoninus Pius themselves:

‘...In the year [. . .], the council and people (honour with statues) [Soados], son of Boliades, son of Soados, son of Thaimisamsos, pious and patriotic, because in many notable instances nobly and with a love of honour he supported the merchants, caravans, and citizens in Vologasias. And for these deeds, he was given witness by letters from the divine Hadrian and the most divine emperor Antoninus, his son, and likewise by an edict of Publicius Marcellus and his letter and those of subsequent consular governors, and he was honoured with decrees and statues by the council and people, by caravans at various times, and by citizens individually...’¹⁶

This shows that not only had his sponsorship and legitimation by provincial governors become a common practice, but that highest authority (the emperor) had recognised his deeds. This demonstrates the genuine importance the Roman state attached to his activity. By this point Palmyra had taken the name of Hadrian, and was clearly within the empire, and yet it

¹⁶ *PAT* 1062. Translated in Andrade 2012: 81-2.

was autonomously regulating and managing security in the south-Syrian desert, and seemingly alone. Rather than become directly involved, Rome responded to the situation by sponsoring legitimising a leading Palmyrene like Soados to carry out these tasks and indirectly keep peace and security on Rome's desert frontier. The episode shows that a role that appears as a local, or region-specific one, could have had wider implications as an imperial function. And, in many ways, it prefigures the rise of Odenathus.

Odenathus: Palmyrene Prince or Roman Magistrate?

By the time of Odenathus (AD 250's-60s), Palmyra had become a *colonia*, as mentioned above, and had also become involved with towns on the Euphrates.¹⁷ It was a powerful and prosperous trading city with power far beyond its immediate hinterlands, but it was also, as we have seen, a Roman city, and had been integrated into the empire. It is in this context that Odenathus begins his rise to power. The fact that the city was a *colonia*, meant that it was possible for prominent members to enter the ranks of the Roman elite. Odenathus was born into the military elite of Palmyra, and eventually took part in the protection of caravans. He was clearly successful: a statue, dated to AD 252, shows that Odenathus had become the military leader of the city (*exarch* in Latin or *rš'* in Palmyrene/Aramaic) by this time.¹⁸ He had also become a Roman senator at some point before this.¹⁹ More interesting, is that

¹⁷ Palmyrene archers had occupied Dura while under Roman rule, probably from AD 165. And Palmyrene military forces are attested as being stationed further south, on the river Euphrates, at Ana and Gamla: see map.

¹⁸ *PAT* 2753.

¹⁹ Hartmann 2001: 92; Southern 2008: 43; Gawlikowski 2010: 468.

by the end of this decade, further inscriptions show that Odenathus had received the title *hypatikos*, this is the Greek translation of *consularis*, in Latin, which signifies an ex-Consul or someone of consular rank. This may, and very likely does mean, that he had taken on some administrative role directly in Roman provincial government, and this could very well mean that he had governed Syria Phoenice, the Roman province in which Palmyra was situated. It may be that in the turbulence of the mid-third century, and the lead up to what is described as the ‘Crisis of the Third Century’, Rome looked to trustworthy indigenous leaders to rule on its behalf. Certainly, if Odenathus was a governor, then what happens next makes sense.

In 260 Shapur I, the Persian Shah, or Shahanshah (King of Kings), invaded the Roman province of Syria for the third time. The Roman armies were beaten back, and Antioch (the provincial capital of Syria) taken. When the emperor Valerian attempted to attack the retreating Persian army, he was also defeated and captured.²⁰ Amid this disaster, Odenathus rallied Syria and lead an army of what most of our limited sources refer to as ‘Syrian peasants’.²¹ It is unclear whether he had regular Roman forces at his disposal, but his army of ‘Syrians peasants’ must also have included Palmyrene forces which he had commanded for years. With these forces, and like any good Roman citizen and (ex)magistrate, he both defeated a usurper, named Quietus, at Emesa, and then marched to defeat the retreating Persian army in Mesopotamia and restored Roman provincial government there. It is likely that he then took on some sort of role as a protector and governor for the entire

²⁰ This can be seen on a relief depicting Valerian’s surrender to Shapur I: see fig. 3.

²¹ Festus *Brev.* 23; Jerome *Chron.* 261st Olympiad; Orosius *Hist.* 7.22.12. None of these is contemporary with the events.

Roman east after this point, and that he filled in a power vacuum that had arisen after the Persian invasion. This was primarily based on titles shown in inscriptions, in Palmyrene/Aramaic, after his death, which describe Odenathus as King of Kings (*MLK MLK*) and 'restorer of the east'. Whether this was a formal position granted by the emperor, or a simply an honorary title, is unknown. His son and successor, Vaballathus, certainly thought so, as he apparently took the title (in Greek) '*epanorthotes* of the east', which is normally translated into Latin as *corrector*, which suggests a formal appointment by the emperor.²² If he inherited this title from his father, then Odenathus must have also held such a position.²³ Whatever the case, Vaballathus at least inherited a *de facto* role as a governor and protector of the east (thanks to the efforts of his mother). And yet, despite their rise to power as eastern 'Kings of Kings', both Odenathus and his successor remained loyal to Rome and framed that power (perhaps primarily) in Roman terms.

The Palmyrene Empire

In AD 267/8 Odenathus was assassinated, but thanks to the quick actions and manoeuvres of Zenobia, she secured the succession to Odenathus' power and position for Vaballathus and acted as regent to her young son. They remained loyal to Rome and the emperor in the west, as can be seen by coins minted at Antioch where Vaballathus appears alongside the new emperor Aurelian as a mere Roman *dux* (general).²⁴ And it was only when Aurelian, who sought

²² A *corrector* was an ill-defined but established administrative role.

²³ Potter 1990: 392-3.

²⁴ See fig. 4 (Top: Aurelian; Bottom: Vaballathus).

draw in the disparate elements of the empire, declared war and began his invasion of the east, that Zenobia and Vaballathus claimed the titles Augusta and Augustus. The fact that they took these titles shows that, even at this point, Zenobia did not break with Rome and declare an independent Palmyra but framed her faction as a Roman one competing for the supreme Roman title.²⁵ Despite their efforts, however, Aurelian's invasion was a success, and she was defeated in battle at Immae, Emesa and the final siege of Palmyra (where she is said to have fled east on a camel).²⁶ When Zenobia was captured, she was sent back to Rome with her son, and, according to some sources, perhaps because she was the former wife of a senator herself, married a nobleman or senator.²⁷ If the latter tradition is true, then Zenobia seems to have integrated somewhat seamlessly into the society of the elite at Rome. It would also reflect how far Palmyrene elite society had integrated into the elite society of the empire, even in Rome.

Odenathus had carved out an important role for himself within the Roman empire by becoming the most distinguished leader and commander of his unique city. And, like Soados before him, Rome recognised, sponsored, and then legitimised the role Odenathus was playing on behalf of the empire. In so doing, Odenathus made Palmyra a centre for the administration of the Roman east and paved the way for Zenobia and Vaballathus to stake their claim to empire. This takes us back to the comparison at the beginning of this paper. Cleopatra was able to use her close relationship to Antony to expand her kingdom and power, but it was under a Roman aegis. Zenobia could be

²⁵ Vaballathus was depicted, in Roman style, sporting the title Augustus and imperial regalia on coinage: see fig. 5.

²⁶ Zosimus: 1.60.1.

²⁷ Syncellus: 721; Zonaras: 12.27.

said to have done something similar. The difference was that her kingdom was an integral part of the Roman administration. It remains an open question as to whether Zenobia and her son sought an independent Palmyrene empire, or to rule the Roman empire as ambitious members of the Roman elite and the imperial administration. If the latter seems more likely, then it made little difference. Propaganda served Aurelian as it had Octavian: the image of an 'eastern queen' was offensive to Roman sensibilities. It made Zenobia and the 'Palmyrene empire', even as a subsidiary administrative unit of the Roman empire, unacceptable to Aurelian and the west, whose ultimate mantra would be *imperium Palmyrenorum delendum est*. Although, tellingly, the city itself survived as a Roman legionary base.

Bibliography

Andrade, N. 2012. 'Inscribing the Citizen: Soados and the Civic Context of Palmyra'. *MAARAV*. 19. pp. 65-90.

Appian *The Civil Wars*.

Dio *Roman History*.

Festus *Summary of the History of Rome*.

Gawlikowski, M. 2010. 'Odainat of Palmyra between Rome and Persia'.

Wiewiorowski, J. et al. *Hortus Historiae: Studies in Honour of Professor Jozef Wolski*. Warsaw. pp. 467-79.

Hartmann, U. 2001. *Das palmyrenische Teilreich*. Stuttgart: Steiner.

Jerome *Chronicle*.

Meyer, J.C., and Seland, E.H. 2006. 'Palmyra and the trade-route to the Euphrates'. *ARAM*. pp. 497-523.

Millar, F. 2006. 'The Roman *coloniae* of the Near East: A Study in Cultural Relations'. Millar, F., Cotton, H.M., and Rogers, G.M. *Rome, the Greek World and the East Volume 3: The Greek World, the Jews, and the East*. University of California Press. pp. 164-222.

Orosius *Seven Books of History Against the Pagans*.

PAT = Hillers, D.R. and Cussini, E. 1995. *Palmyrene Aramaic Texts*. Johns Hopkins University Press.

Plutarch *Antony*.

SHA Tyr. Trig. = *The Augustan History: Thirty Tyrants*.

Sommer, M. 2016. 'The Venice of the Sands: Palmyrene Trade Revisited'.

Meyer, J.C., Seland E.H, and Anfinset, N. *Palmyrena: City, Hinterland and Caravan Trade Between Orient and Occident*. Oxford. pp. 11-17.

Southern, P. 2008. *Empress Zenobia: Palmyra's Rebel Queen*. London.

Stephanos of Byzantium *Ethnica*.

Syncellus *Chronicle/Chronology*.

Will, E. 1957. 'Marchands et chefs de caravanes à Palmyre'. *Syria*. 34. pp. 262-77.

Yon, J-B. 2002. *Les Notables de Palmyre*. Institut français d'archéologie du proche-orient. Beirut.

Young, G.K. 2001. *Rome's Eastern Trade: International Commerce and Imperial Policy, 31 BC-AD 305*. London.

Zonaras *Extracts of History*.

Zosimus *New Hist*

Copyright and Licensing Terms

Authors retain the copyright of their papers without reservation. However, they will allow the journal first right of publication. This journal does not require payment from the authors for publication, or from readers to access the articles or use them in their own scholarly work. The license this journal follows does state the work can be shared, with acknowledgement of the work's author and the journal in which it first appeared.

Authors may enter into separate, contractual arrangements for the nonexclusive distribution of the journal's published version of the work, with an acknowledgement of its initial publication in this journal.

Licensing

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0

International License (CC BY 4.0)

ISSN: 2754-2408