Empress Zenobia and Gender Bias Among the Romans

Francesca Spolidoro, Michele R. Salzman
Department of History
University of California, Riverside

ABSTRACT

During the tumultuous third century, Roman hegemony was challenged in several important parts of the Empire. Such a revolt against Rome was laid at the feet of Zenobia, Queen of Palmyra. Likening herself to Cleopatra VII, to whom she claimed ancestral relationship, Zenobia spread Palmyrene influence throughout the Eastern Mediterranean from Anatolia to Alexandria after the death of the Emperor, Gallienus. Roman historians, often biased when dealing with strong women, have usually been quick to condemn Zenobia’s actions as outright rebellion. But a closer examination of the events leading to Palmyra’s ascendance, vis a vie Rome, and Zenobia’s actions during the first several years of her regency do not support the idea that she and her son, Vallabathus, heir to the Palmyrean throne, sought trouble with Rome. Indeed, the importance and strength of the alliance between her husband, Odaenathus, and Rome, showed her actions to fill the power vacuum created by the king’s death a logical course of action. Rather than fomenting revolt, by enlarging Palmyra’s sphere of influence and increasing its power in the East, Zenobia was continuing her husband’s efforts to maintain order in the Eastern Empire and to protect the peace from disruption by the Sassanid Persians.

FACULTY MENTOR

Michele R. Salzman
Department of History

Francesca is an intelligent, articulate and highly motivated student. Her passion for Latin literature led her to consider the ways in which Romans construct enemies, and she was much inspired by the ways in which both ancient Romans and modern scholars interpreted Cleopatra and other female enemies. This led Francesca to a highly sophisticated, nuanced appreciation of Zenobia, and the ways in which Romans manipulated her image. She was a pleasure to work with.

AUTHOR

Francesca Spolidoro
History and Anthropology

Francesca Spolidoro is a fourth year History and Anthropology dual major, with an emphasis on ancient civilizations. She plans to pursue both a MA and PhD in the field of Ancient History. For this article, however, the research sprouted from a simple question: Given the intense patriarchal nature of Roman culture, how was it that a third century woman was able to garner significant power in the eastern part of the Empire and hold it for so long? Francesca would like to thank Professor Michele Salzman for her guidance while conducting the research for this project. She would also like to especially thank the Oneida Tribe of Indians of Wisconsin for their continuous support and access.
“Some god, I believe, was angry with the commonwealth, who after Valerian’s death, was unwilling to preserve Odaenathus alive. For a surety he, with his wife Zenobia, would have restored not only the East, which he had already brought back to its ancient condition, but also all parts of the world everywhere…” (H.A. “Tyranni XXX,” 15.6)

Banknotes currently issued by the Central Bank of Syria are unique: one side of the bill pictures scenes of modern Syria with script written in English, while the reverse side portrays scenes of ancient Syria with Arabic script. The English side of this bill pictures a massive, modern bridge spanning a body of water, leading towards modern skyscrapers. On the reverse side, the note displays the profile of a woman, posed much like Queen Elizabeth II on British pound notes. The woman faces an ancient stone arch and colonnade. The Arabic script informs us that the woman is Queen Zenobia and that the ancient, misty city she gazes towards is Palmyra, the principal city of her kingdom. Palmyra was the first century city that stood at the crossroads of the Silk Road and the old Roman roads that led north towards Antioch, Tarsus and Europe, and the road leading south towards Alexandria and North Africa. Although the name Zenobia is not as familiar to Westerners today as Cleopatra, another powerful ancient Eastern queen, for people of the Middle East, Zenobia remains a symbol of Arabic power, courage and independence.

The story of Zenobia and Palmyra has many important points of resonance to our world. Hers is the story of an Arab woman, ensnared between duty to her country and rapprochement with Rome, while she continually avoided domination by her powerful neighbor, Persia. Much of how we have come to imagine Zenobia has come to us through the works of writers, poets, musicians and artists who lived long after her life was over. Chaucer lauds her beauty, enthusiasm and love of learning in “The Monk’s Tale” from Canterbury Tales (lines 3442-3500). Even before scholarly study of Zenobia commenced in the mid-eighteenth century, “she had already entered Western art in the beginning of that century when Gianbatista Tiepolo painted a series of tableaux on the walls of the palace of the Zenobio family in Venice” (Southern, 14). It seems that much of how we are meant to feel about Zenobia has been romanticized by Western artists, while most of what we know of her has come to us through the biased eye of ancient Western historians.

Zenobia and her husband, Odaenathus, ruled on the far Eastern limits of the Roman Empire during the time that is commonly referred to by historians as the “Third Century Crisis.” The ancient Sibylline Prophecies - which nearly all Romans accepted as true - predicted that Rome’s glory would last a thousand years, and by the beginning of the third century that end date was rapidly approaching. Along with internal administrative problems, the power of Rome was also being challenged militarily in many important parts of the empire. Such a challenge to Roman hegemony has been ascribed to Zenobia. Acting as Regent for her son, Vallabathus, after the murders of her husband and his greatest ally, Emperor Gallienus, Zenobia sought to spread Palmyrene influence in the Eastern part of the Empire. Sometimes through force, but also through commerce, Zenobia controlled the eastern Mediterranean, from Anatolia to Alexandria (Zosimus, 1.39.2). Roman leaders, and subsequently Roman historians, true to form when dealing with strong women, were quick to condemn Zenobia’s actions as outright rebellion (White, 60). But a closer examination of the events leading up to Palmyra’s ascendancy and Zenobia’s actions during the first several years of her Regency do not lend themselves to the idea that she and her son sought trouble with Rome. Instead, the importance of the alliance between Odaenathus and Rome underlines the logic behind her attempt to fill the power vacuum created with the king’s death a logical course of action. Zenobia believed she enjoyed the same alliance and standing as her dead husband. By enlarging Palmyra’s sphere of influence, she attempted to bring order to the Eastern Empire and protect Roman territory from Sassanid encroachments into the eastern colonies. Many argue that Zenobia overstepped her Roman mandate. However, given Emperor Aurelian’s reputation for being “over-violent by nature and eager for revenge,” perhaps his response was “too much like a tyrant...too bloody a method of checking what should have been cured by a milder means” (H.A. “Life of Aurelian,” 21.5). One wonders if Aurelian would have had the same response to Odaenathus, or did it just
As the heroic and ultimately tragic Queen of Palmyra, Zenobia ranks with two other heroines of ancient history: the British Queen Boudicca and Queen Cleopatra VII of Egypt, who “stood firm for their principles and their people . . . and were ultimately defeated” (Southern, 1). In each case, the tragedy is significant because they are the last of their lines and ultimately their kingdoms ceased to be after their deaths, swallowed up by Rome. These women have passed into legend as a result of their heroic lives, individual struggles and tragic fates, but also, and perhaps most significantly, by the simple fact that they were women, queens who ruled as capably and fought as fiercely as kings.

Patricia Southern, who has written extensively on Roman military campaigns during Zenobia’s time, points out in her work, Empress Zenobia: history is written by the victors, who combine “righteous self-justification with a celebration of prowess, obliterating in the process the motives, aims and ambitions of their enemies (Southern, 1).” The Romans disliked clever, capable, and especially martial women, unless, of course, they were content to remain in the shadows, and used their abilities or fortunes to further their husbands’ ambitions. Women such as these queens, who without husbands endeavored to fill the shoes of kings, were either condemned outright or hardly mentioned at all by western historians. We have only a few paragraphs on Boudicca’s complaints and subsequent war against Rome from Tacitus in The Agricola (XIV.29-37). Aside from minimal mentions in Caesar and Cicero (who made no effort to hide his contempt for her), most of what we know about Cleopatra, the most powerful woman of her age, in fact of any age, comes from the biography of Mark Antony in Plutarch’s Lives. The ancient Egyptian fetish for record keeping and the historical record of her coins provide most of what we know about her from her own people.

In searching for the heart of the “Zenobia matter,” Cleopatra’s story provides a compelling comparison. Because it stood at the crossroads of the Silk Road, Palmyra controlled the caravans of eastern goods that sought their way into the entire Mediterranean world, as well as north and east into Persia. An ancient city that had developed around an oasis on the edges of the Fertile Crescent, Palmyra was one of the great commercial hubs of the east. Likewise, with abundant natural resources and vast supplies of wheat, Egypt was the breadbasket of the Empire. Cleopatra could feed the Romans, or she could starve them. The fortunes of Rome came to depend on the flood of the Nile. Once she established herself as the last remaining Ptolemy, it became Cleopatra’s duty to insure Egypt’s sovereignty, and because of her political acumen and administrative acuteness, she nearly succeeded. Unfortunately, it has mostly been through Elizabeth Taylor’s depiction and by Shakespeare’s words that the popular western understanding of Cleopatra as the sultry seductress has been perpetuated.

In Cleopatra, a Life, Pulitzer Prize winning biographer Stacy Schiff, clearly states the central theme of her book: Romans, and especially Roman historians, had little use for powerful women. A woman’s place in society differed greatly from east to west. In Egypt (and the East, generally) females negotiated their own marriages. They inherited alongside their brothers, owned property independently. In Rome, on the other hand, women were for marrying for political alliance, financial gain, and, of course, producing heirs. Cleopatra, and certainly Zenobia, were trained from childhood to manage their own affairs. When they reached their thrones, their subjects would expect and require that they use all their training to manage the state’s affairs as well.

Cleopatra’s, and ultimately Egypt’s, tragedy is that in her time there were always two extremely able and powerful men seeking to become the ultimate power in Rome. Whether pinched between Caesar and Pompeii, or Octavian and Antony, Cleopatra’s Egypt and the entire Mediterranean world suffered because these men crashed into each other in civil wars. Because she controlled Egypt and its immense resources, Cleopatra was forced into alliance with one or the other. Ultimately, in the crucible of imperial politics as played out during the momentous end of the Roman Republic, Cleopatra lost. After Antony’s defeat at Actium, and Cleopatra’s suicide, Egypt did not emerge as a sovereign state again until the twentieth century. Three hundred years after Octavian became the first Roman...
Empress Zenobia and Gender Bias among the Romans

Francesca Spolidoro

Emperor, Zenobia found herself with a similar problem. However, unlike Cleopatra, her problem was not aligning herself with the winner in the battle between two strong, would-be emperors, but rather (at least until Aurelian) too many weak or mediocre men ascending to power in rapid succession. The Roman “Third Century Crisis” was a crisis on several fronts, but it was predominately the problem of the lack of stability. By the middle of the third century the orderly transfer of power from emperor to emperor was completely shattered. Roman armies fought against each other in order to have their own general proclaimed Emperor. Emperors were assassinated by their own guards. On the eastern limits of the Empire and always threatened by its ambitious neighbors, especially the Sassanids, Palmyra lacked a strong Roman presence when it was most needed. From the year 243, when Zenobia’s husband, Odaenathus became ruler of Palmyra, until 268 when he was murdered, no fewer than 24 emperors or usurpers held the imperial scepter, and then two more before Aurelian took power in 270. Rome was declining, while Persia, under Sapor I, seemed resurgent. Palmyra certainly required nimble leadership in choosing its most important alliance. Ultimately, Odaenathus cast his lot with Rome. He served her well and was greatly honored for his efforts on Rome’s behalf.

The question we must ask, then, is why would Odaenathus remain allied to Rome given the state of the Empire? His true feelings are probably close to those of the Armenian king, Artavasdes, sent in a letter to Sapor condemning his imprisonment of the emperor, Valerian: “For Valerian is being sought back by his son, his grandson, and the generals of Rome, by all Gaul, all Africa, all Spain, all Italy, and all of the nations of Illyricum, the East and Pontus. So then you have captured one old man but made all the nations of the world your enemy.” Velenus, King of the Cadusii also reminded Sapor that the “Romans are never more dangerous than when they are defeated” (H.A., “Valerianus,” 3.1-2). Odaenathus knew that Rome would return to the East after Gallienus eventually settled the West. Meanwhile, by adding Palmyra to the list of countries seeking Valerian’s release, he would, in Rome’s absence, be able to act independently, increase his power and influence in the region, and eventually have more to offer when Rome inevitably returned (Winsbury, 78-81). It is essential that we understand Odaenathus’s actions in this light if we are to later place Zenobia’s regency in a more favorable light than many historians would grant. Because Odaenathus succeeded so spectacularly, Zenobia was able to act even more independently, continuing to push the Persians back while pushing Palmyra’s agenda forward.

The third leg of the Roman crisis was the continual rebellion of conquered tribes and nations from 223 on when Ardashir first rose up to reclaim the kingdom of Parthia (White, 175-79). Persia proved a source of constant trouble for Rome until 261 when Gallienus accepted Odaenathus as king of Palmyra. This is an important date because it marks the acceptance of Palmyra as an independent state and Odaenathus as its ruler by Gallienus. As an independent state and ally of Rome, Palmyra would continue to grow in stature, wealth and power. However, when the treaty Augustus had brokered with Parthia was broken by Trajan during the first century, Palmyra stood directly in the path of Parthia’s challenge Rome. By the mid-third century Rome came to count on Odaenathus, the only power in the east capable of keeping Parthia in check.

In 199, Emperor Septimus Severus elevated Palmyra to colonial status, increasing its power in the region and its level of self-rule. As time passed some Palmyrene families amassed great wealth from the caravan trade and became members of the Roman aristocracy. Among these was Odaenathus’s family, and from that time onward they were titled Septimus and Septima. They enjoyed all the rights and privileges of citizens of Rome.

While Valerian was in captivity in Parthia, his son Gallienus assumed complete control. Gallienus was slow to move against Sapor, garnering universal criticism from his contemporaries. But Gallienus is not deserving of such great scorn. He had no shortage of battles to fight against the Goths along the Rhine and Danube. The task of freeing Valerian and dealing with Sapor, as it turned out, would be left to the only other power in the east with the ability to do so, Odaenathus and Zenobia.

In the past, Palmyra had been able to maintain friendly relations both with Rome, her ally, and Parthia, who was probably too weak to challenge Rome before Gallienus. With the ascension of Sapor, the Sassanid Persians were
determined to gain both economic and political control of the east (Stoneman 93). It is at this time that Odaenathus is accepted as King of Palmyra by Gallienus. In turn, Palmyra offered its military service to Rome, not as a client state but as its independent ally, to put down Sapor and rescue the Emperor. Odaenathus was spectacularly successful in stopping Sassanid expansion, but not in rescuing Valerian. The Emperor died in captivity.

In 261, entrusted with the command of the legions and other armies of the East by Gallienus, and with his own infantry, archers and cavalry, Odaenathus rode out of Palmyra. Zenobia, armored, mounted on her horse, rode at his side (Vaughan 56). They met and defeated Sapor somewhere near the Euphrates. Sapor retreated rapidly to his capitol at Ctesiphon, leaving behind his entourage of wives, consorts and children, with all their riches. Not pressing their advantage, Odaenathus and Zenobia returned to Palmyra with their royal captives, having restored all the territory lost to Sapor, except Ctesiphon (Zosimus, 1.39.1-2). Their military success did not go unnoticed in Rome. Gallienus named Odaenathus supreme power in the east, again entrusting all the Legions stationed there to his command. In 263, Odaenathus and Zenobia again marched out of the gates of Palmyra to attack Sapor at his capitol, Ctesiphon. It was during this campaign that, in 264, Odaenathus received the ultimate honor from Gallienus and the Senate. He was elevated to the rank of Augustus. In this, Gallienus performed one of the few acts of his reign that met with universal approval. This “measure the Senate, the City, and men of every age everywhere received with approval (H.A. “Gallienus,” 12.1.” According to Professor Vaughan, Zenobia must have become Augusta at the same time (Vaughan 58). Odaenathus’s accomplishments are remarkable. There is no disagreement about that. There is some disagreement, though, about his official status. What was the extent of his authority, if any, in the Roman military and administrative system from 260 until his death? The essential question becomes: “Was he acting as a Roman official under orders from Rome and with a remit from the then Roman Emperor Gallienus- or something else? The dominant trend has been to see Odaenathus as a faithful ally of Rome acting to uphold Roman rule and authority with formal recognition from the Roman Emperor and a whole raft of impressive titles. (Winsbury, 73).” The “whole raft of impressive titles” is exceptionally important to our discussion of Zenobia. After the death of Odaenathus, many titles fall to Vallabathus and Zenobia. Zosimus refers to her as Septima, and more importantly Augusta, in the texts. Vallabathus is referred to as Dux Romanorum (commander of the Romans) or Dux Orientis (commander of the east) with authorized imperium from Rome to act as corrector or restitutor of the east. These were titles that Odaenathus held from Gallienus and would have been passed on to his successors.

Gallienus’s assassination coming less than a year, perhaps as short a time as one or two months, after Odaenathus’s murder complicated Vallabathus’s succession. All Odaenathus’s power, and thus hers as Regent Queen, issued from Gallienus. Gallienus’s rule had been long, at least compared to the rapid-fire succession of emperors that had preceded him. Zenobia may have expected that practice of emperor-cide to once again become the norm in Rome, leaving Palmyra once again without a constant ally in Rome. Gallienus’s successor, Claudius II, was slow in recognizing Vallabathus’s writ and he made a huge mistake in authorizing a failed military strike against Palmyra. Certainly, Zenobia was discussing possible options with her administrators and, of course, her generals (Winsbury, 87).

Claudius had a serious problem in the west in the form of the break-away Gallic empire and success over the Goths on the Danube was in no way certain. “Zenobia and her supporters had a window of opportunity to consolidate Palmyra’s position before the Roman steamroller was once again set in motion, and took it (Winsbury, 87).”

Zenobia embarked on an expansionist policy “that not so much reversed the policy of Odaenathus, as some suggest, but pushed it to its logical conclusion (Winsbury, 88).” Zenobia and her generals decided to act, to expand their influence and gain a stronger position from which to negotiate when the emperor, whoever that might be, returned, possibly with his legions.

The rich Roman province of Egypt was the ultimate prize to the south. With the Roman commander Probus supporting Claudius against the Goths, and, as Zosimus tells us, a
certain Timagenes already stirring up revolt in Egypt, the time was right for Zenobia (HA, “XXX Tyrants,” 30.11). On the way to Egypt, Zenobia captured Bostra, where a Roman garrison was located, and fought a series of battles with Probus. In the end Palmyra was victorious and held Egypt, with all its vast wealth and power. Zenobia must have known that like her ancestor, Cleopatra, she would not be left alone either. Any disruption of wheat transports to Rome would have the people in the streets calling for her head. We know that Roman politicians had a way of inflaming the plebeians when it served their purposes. Aurelian would need little convincing from the street to turn his attention to Palmyra.

During campaign against the Goths, Claudius succumbed to the plague and his brother Quintillus was murdered. Aurelian ascended the imperial throne. After defeating the Scythians, the Alamanni, and the rogue Gallic Empire in separate campaigns, the Emperor turned his attention to Palmyra which now controlled Egypt and the East as far as Ancyra (White 147). Zosimus gives a complete telling of the events leading up to Zenobia’s defeat and capture, and Aurelius’s return to Palmyra the second time, when he razed it and put many to the sword (HA, “Life of Aurelian,” 31.5-6). After this he took Zenobia to Rome in the fabled golden chains where she was forced to march behind his chariot while he received a lavish and boisterous welcome from the people and the Senate (Zosimus, 39-61).

However, the speed and ease with which Zenobia was able to win all that territory, from near the Black Sea to Alexandria, suggests two things: one, that these cities were weak militarily and could not have stood up to the Persian military, and two, they welcomed Zenobia. “While Claudius was heavily preoccupied elsewhere, and when Aurelian had only recently taken over in Rome, Palmyra may still have been the best bet for survival for these men of Egypt, Antioch, Tyana and Chalcedon” (Winsbury, 91). A strong, independent Palmyra, with self-interest in the region was the last best hope for continual independence from an expanding Persian Empire. “By pursuing ends favorable to Palmyra, by aggressive military means, in the default of Roman forces, Zenobia, Vaballathus and their generals may well have expected their own advantage also to be welcomed by the Roman government (Long, 240).” Zenobia must have gambled on her ability to sway Aurelius into some kind of power sharing alliance since, in her mind at least, she had the writ from her husband, and the Palmyrene military was necessary in the east. Why would Rome want to destroy so powerful an ally, an obvious buffer between it and her enemies in the east? The same could have been claimed for the break-away Gallic Empire on Rome’s northern border. But while Gallienus had seemed content to keep these two forces intact, Aurelian certainly did not. It is significant that in her post defeat interview with Aurelius, she is reported to have said that like Queen Victoria, Postumus’s sponsor in the north, her ambition was to gain a share of power “if distribution of territory allowed it” (Winsbury, 95). Aurelian had no intention to share power. His mission was to once again restore the Roman Empire to its former position as ruler of the world, no matter how problematical the administration of such an empire proved to be. Given the events of the next century, perhaps Aurelian should have taken Zenobia up on her offer.

Zenobia and Odaenathus, if just for a while in a long distant past had a notion of Syria. Though their empire had no fixed borders, though their motivations were often reactions to the confusion of the times, is of little matter. For a country that only emerges in 1945, after centuries of Roman, Ottoman, and post World War I French colonialism, Zenobia is revered, not because she is a woman striving in a man’s world, or the “Warrior Queen” embattled by the super powers of her day, but because she became the symbol of local pride, of self determination and of not waiting to see what the powers that be had in store for her. Maybe, simply, that she had become an Arab acting on the fringes of power.
**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


