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[Zenobia](#)



[Vaballathus](#)

De Imperatoribus Romanis

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Vaballathus^[1] and Zenobia (270-272 A.D.)

Jacqueline F. Long
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Zenobia



Vaballathus

Introduction and Summary

Palmyra was a trading community near the margin of the Roman and Persian empires. In A.D. 270-272, under the leadership of Zenobia, the dowager of its ruling house, and in the name of her young son Vaballathus, Palmyrene forces took control of Roman Egypt, Arabia, and parts of Asia Minor. Although the Palmyrenes' actions were not (we believe) originally seditious in intent, Aurelian regarded the "Palmyrene Revolt" as a serious threat to his sovereignty. He campaigned personally against the Palmyrenes, and he ranked his victory over them along with his recovery of the "Gallic Empire." He reversed the largest extent of disintegration the Roman Empire suffered in the third century.

Background: Palmyra and Odaenathus

Palmyra is the Roman name for a city called Tadmor in its people's own language. It was located near the edge of the Syrian desert, between Roman Syria and Persian Babylonia, at an oasis watered by the Efqa

spring.^[2] It prospered by organizing, guiding, and protecting caravan routes for trade across the desert, especially between Dura Europos and Emesa. The Palmyrenes were ethnically Semitic (Amorite, Aramaic and Arabic), but their business made it easy for them to adopt diverse elements of Greco-Roman and Parthian or Persian culture too.

Palmyra's origins go back to the second millennium B.C. The city lay in the territory that, after Alexander the Great conquered the Persian Empire in 331 B.C., was held by Antigonos Monophthalmos, then Seleucus. But the bulk of the material and literary evidence concerning it dates from the first century B.C. and later. Palmyra lay beyond the region effectively annexed to the Roman empire by Pompey in 63 B.C., although notionally it may have been included. Appian suggests the Palmyrenes were more closely bound to Parthia when Mark Antony tried to raid the city in 41 B.C. (*BC* 5.9.37-40). Yet thereafter political ties with Rome grew increasingly strong.^[3] Germanicus may have been the first Roman to begin a meaningful governmental relationship, during his tour of Rome's eastern provinces in A.D. 18, for the domestic tax law of Palmyra inscribed in 137 expressly cites a letter of his concerning assessment of tax on animals for slaughter.^[4] In 75 Vespasian's governor of Syria, M. Ulpius Traianus (the later emperor's father), tied Palmyra in with Rome's eastern road system and defenses.^[5] Hadrian visited Palmyra probably in 129/30, and gave it privileges as a "free state."^[6] Under Septimius Severus or possibly Caracalla, at the end of the second century or the beginning of the third, Palmyra was raised to the status of a Roman colony.^[7]

From the name Septimius/a used before the Palmyrene names of members of Vaballathus's family, it appears they received Roman citizenship from Severus. This inference in turn suggests that the family dominated Palmyrene affairs by the 190s. But it was Vaballathus's father Odaenathus who in the 250s and 260s linked his prestige in Palmyra with spectacular support of the Roman regime in the east and conspicuous Roman honors. Yet, ironically, the precedents and relationships he established formed the basis for the revolt of the 270s.

A group of inscriptions at Palmyra, bilingual in Palmyrene Aramaic and Greek, reveals a clear line of Odaenathus's ascendants: his great-grandfather was Nador, his grandfather Nador, his grandfather Wahballath, and his father Hairan.^[8] Odaenathus (Palmyrene Odainath) in his turn sired a son, Hairan, by a woman whose identity is not recorded;^[9] Hairan was assassinated together with Odaenathus in 267.^[10] They were survived by Odaenathus's later wife Zenobia (Palmyrene Bath-Zabbai) and his son by her, Vaballathus (Palmyrene Wahballath). Odaenathus's status as "chief of Palmyra" is commemorated on bilingual Greek and Palmyrene inscriptions at Palmyra as early as 251 and 252.^[11] Some of the same inscriptions also attribute Roman rank to Odaenathus, designating him a member of the Roman senate.^[12] By 258, he appears with yet higher Roman dignity as "of consular rank."^[13] The Greek term *hypatikos* is transliterated within the Palmyrene texts. It may reflect Roman recognition of Odaenathus's predominance among the Palmyrenes, purely honorifically; but since the second century *hypatikos* had been used to designate the governor of Roman provincial Syria, so it is possible Odaenathus held that office.^[14] After the Persians captured the senior emperor, **Valerian**, at Carrhae, Odaenathus did attack them as they withdrew from Roman territory in 260. In 261 Odaenathus besieged the usurper **Quietus, Macrianus's** son, and his king-maker **Callistus/"Ballista"** at Emesa and secured their deaths.^[15] In subsequent years, he campaigned successfully in Persian territory; he is said to have won back **Nisibis** to Roman control, and to have penetrated as far as **Ctesiphon**. Jewish sources reflect a campaign in Babylonia, in which Odaenathus pursued Palmyrene trading-interests perhaps at least as much as Roman advantage against the Persians.^[16] Zosimus reports that Odaenathus led Roman legions as well as the Syrian levies noted by other sources (Zos. 1.39.1).

Odaenathus celebrated his Persian victories by assuming the aggressively eastern-looking title "king of kings," *basileus basileon* in Greek and *mlk mlk'* in Palmyrene inscriptions; he shared the title with his elder son.^[17] The surviving Roman emperor **Gallienus** confirmed Odaenathus's military authority in the eastern part of the Empire.^[18] His exact office or title is not directly attested, but Vaballathus's later claims to the titles *dux Romanorum* and *corrector totius orientis* must have been founded on Odaenathus's

precedent. [\[\[19\]\]](#) Odaenathus's titlature rose on a career of supporting Roman interests, but devotion to Rome does not complete his story. Peter the Patrician relates that at one time Odaenathus sent camel-loads of rich gifts to the Persian king Shapur, seeking alliance, but Shapur scorned the gifts and demanded complete subjection (*FHG* 4.187). Since Odaenathus is said to have claimed that he had not injured Persian interests, this proposition evidently preceded his attacks after the capture of [Valerian](#), but by how long is not clear. The incident is interesting as it shows Odaenathus weighing Rome against Persia: implicitly, considering Palmyra's advantage and his own independently, not as an appendage of either great empire. He may have been prompted by shifts in local relationships of power. More certainly, Odaenathus took the initiative to change his position: he enhanced his prominence in Palmyra and Palmyra's prominence in Roman affairs not only by the mere coincidence of Roman needs. Whether or not Gallienus knew he could have lost Palmyrene assistance in the East, he rewarded Odaenathus with extraordinary Roman honors in order to encourage further support. The fact that Odaenathus advertised his honors at Palmyra, in Palmyrene and in Greek, demonstrates that he expected his achievements to burnish his prestige before a local audience too. Dedications from Palmyrene subordinates and guilds, and favorable notice in the thirteenth Sibylline Oracle, corroborate his success.

Nevertheless, Odaenathus and his elder son were assassinated in 267. [\[\[20\]\]](#) Most of the sources blame a kinsman for the murders, but two late sources implicate Gallienus. It is hard to see how he, at least, could have expected to profit by the deaths: no break appears in his relations with Odaenathus's successors, and the accusation seems only to slander an unpopular emperor. Probably Roman authors knew no more than the fact Odaenathus died.

Zenobia and Vaballathus and the First Steps to Revolt

On Odaenathus's death in 267, his leadership over the Palmyrenes and claim to the titles "illustrious King of Kings" and *corrector totius orientis* passed nominally to his young son Vaballathus. [\[\[21\]\]](#) Vaballathus's age is inferred from the conventions of Roman coin-portraits, which represent him as a prepubescent youth in 270-272: presumably he was born within a few years of 260. [\[\[22\]\]](#) Ancient sources identify Vaballathus's mother, Odaenathus's widow Zenobia, as the true director of Palmyrene actions and policies put forward in Vaballathus's name. [\[\[23\]\]](#) Her childbearing implies that she was born perhaps around 240. [\[\[24\]\]](#) Yet she must have possessed a commanding personality and will, to have been able to assume Odaenathus's authority for herself and her son as effectively as she did.

Initially, Zenobia's and Vaballathus's control seems to have picked up smoothly where Odaenathus's was terminated (e.g., Zos. 1.39.2). But in 269/70 Palmyrene forces broke into violent action. Troops fought south through Bostra, destroying the temple of Jupiter Hammon. [\[\[25\]\]](#) Milestones honoring Vaballathus as *rex co(n)s(ul) imperator dux Romanorum* 15 and 20 miles south of Bostra along the road to Philadelphia mark further extension of Palmyrene control, and damage at Petra may be attributed to the same Palmyrene campaign. [\[\[26\]\]](#) The Palmyrenes invaded Egypt, where their general Zabdas was assisted by a pro-Palmyrene Egyptian, Timagenes. They initially defeated a defending army of Egyptians, then were expelled by the Roman prefect of Egypt, Tenagino Probus, with forces he diverted from an expedition against pirates in Cyrene. But when Probus encamped on a mountain near Egyptian Babylon, at the upstream apex of the Delta, Timagenes was able to cut him off and capture him. [\[\[27\]\]](#) Other expeditions struck more tenuously into Asia Minor as far as Ancyra and Chalcedon (Zos. 1.50.1).

In conjunction with these expeditions, a peculiar innovation appears at the Roman mint of Antioch and at the provincial mint at Alexandria. Both mints operated normally through the reign of [Claudius II](#), and the Alexandrian mint issued coins of standard design for [Quintillus](#) in his brief reign and for [Aurelian](#) in his year 1. The Antiochene mint did not issue for [Quintillus](#), and for [Aurelian](#) issued first antoniniani with two "heads." [Aurelian](#) appears on one side, with the usual attributes and titlature of a Roman emperor. On the other side appears a beardless young man labeled *VABALATHVS V(ir) C(larissimus) R(ex) IM(perator) D(ux) R(omanorum)* [\[\[28\]\]](#) After its first regular issue of civic tetradrachms for [Aurelian](#), the Alexandrian mint too issued double-headed coins for [Aurelian](#) and Vaballathus jointly; [\[\[29\]\]](#) the Greek titlature used for Vaballathus corresponds to that of the Antiochene coins and the Jordanian milestones,

and to somewhat fuller formulas used to date Egyptian papyri. [\[\[30\]\]](#) It replicates Odaenathus's senatorial status and the Roman military authority he won from Gallienus.

Evidently the Palmyrenes obtained control of Antioch before they did of Alexandria. A proclamation issued in Vaballathus's name while the Egyptian campaigns were advancing reflects another interesting facet of the revolt, that the Palmyrenes expected to derive support from Zenobia's claim to be descended from the Ptolemies, for Vaballathus describes Alexandria as his "ancestral city." [\[\[31\]\]](#) This astonishing filiation would seem a wild fantasy of the *Historia Augusta*, but for the fact that Kallinikos of Petra, who flourished during the reign of Gallienus, addressed a ten-book history of Alexandria "to Cleopatra": Zenobia is the only possible dedicatee. [\[\[32\]\]](#) The identification may also relate to use of the Hellenistic name Antiochus for Zenobia's father, even in Palmyrene inscriptions. [\[\[33\]\]](#) Certainly Zenobia did draw Greek intellectuals to her court and pursue an interest in Hellenic culture; [\[\[34\]\]](#) Vaballathus's proclamation shows that she also exploited it to conciliate a broader public.

Why did the Palmyrenes raise arms within Roman territory? Why did they act when they did? Although Zenobia and Vaballathus attempted to revive Odaenathus's memory in Vaballathus, they did not strike when it was freshest, when Odaenathus died. They did not time their expeditions in conformity with the vicissitudes of Roman imperial succession, for they anticipated [Claudius's](#) death in 270. The idea that they sought to rebel against Roman authority is repudiated by the double-headed coins, which declare [Aurelian's](#) sovereignty superior to Vaballathus's. [\[\[35\]\]](#) Commercial interests may well have helped urge them into Egypt, where they had long enjoyed trading contacts in Alexandria. [\[\[36\]\]](#) Timagenes exemplifies the fact that they also received local support. In Arabia, later Arabic legendary history places a figure closely based on Zenobia in bitter conflict with a coalition of Arab tribes called the Tanukh and led by the sheikh Jadhimah. Although the story's vivid, murderous confrontations cannot reflect the whole truth -- the very existence of the Roman empire on the periphery of the Arab struggle is completely ignored, for example -- the legend could have been germinated by a rivalry acute enough to precipitate the Palmyrenes' actions in 269/70. [\[\[37\]\]](#) Local rivalries and allegiances with Palmyra are attested by Arabic graffiti of the period. [\[\[38\]\]](#) Odaenathus had won honors from Gallienus 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. The double-headed coins speciously proclaim a partnership: they lay claim to central authorization in hopes to outface local opposition.

The Roman Reaction

Of course, the opposition of Tenagino Probus should have signalled that the Roman government might not accede to Palmyrene ends. The new emperor, [Aurelian](#), proved dramatically less complaisant than [Gallienus](#). The fullest extant account of Aurelian's campaign against the Palmyrenes is given by Zosimus (Zos. 1.50-61). It dovetails roughly with the more capriciously condensed and anecdotal account in the *Historia Augusta* Life of Aurelian (*HA Aurel.* 22-31); the late antique epitomators and Byzantine chroniclers provide important details both corroborative and supplemental. [\[\[39\]\]](#)

Campaigns against Germanic barbarians around the Danube, in Pannonia and in Italy kept [Aurelian](#) busy in 270/1. But after inaugurating defensive fortifications at Rome he led his army east again, crossing from Byzantium into Bithynia and proceeding east and south toward Syria. He dispatched a subordinate, possibly the future emperor Probus, to recover Egypt. [\[\[40\]\]](#) [Aurelian](#) himself and his army are said to have taken Ancyra back from the adherents of the Palmyrenes easily, but faced initial opposition at Tyana before the city was betrayed to him. Authors who dilate upon the episode use it to illustrate principles of just conquest.

Advancing further, [Aurelian](#) encountered Zenobia and a large army in the vicinity of Antioch (Zos. 1.50.2), apparently to the east of the city along the road to Beroa, in the plain before the village of

Immae. [\[\[41\]\]Aurelian](#) recognized that the heavy-armed Palmyrene cavalry excelled his own, but also, acutely, that their very armor could become a weapon against them. He detached his infantry and instructed his cavalry to wait till the Palmyrenes attacked, then pretend to flee and lead a chase while the heat baked into the heavy metal. After a while, the Roman horsemen were able to mow down and trample their exhausted opponents.

The survivors escaped into Antioch. Zenobia's general Zabdas deceived the populace by leading through the city, as if captured, a man who resembled [Aurelian](#). Then the Palmyrenes evacuated in the night and made for Emesa. They left a detachment of soldiers behind, who established themselves on a hilltop overlooking the road near the suburb of Daphne. [Aurelian](#), who had been welcomed into Antioch, instructed his soldiers to use a testudo formation with overlocking shields to defend against the Palmyrenes' advantage of height; once the Romans thus were on the same level with the Palmyrenes, they were able to rout and kill them.

[Aurelian](#) and his victorious forces advanced south and east, and were welcomed into Apamea, Larissa, and Arethusa as they came to them. They encountered the Palmyrene army next drawn up in the plain before Emesa. The Palmyrene cavalry outmatched the Roman, but instead of surrounding the Roman army they broke ranks to pursue the Roman horsemen. The Roman and allied infantry took advantage of the disarray and wrought great slaughter. Zosimus particularly credits the Palestinian contingent's clubs and cudgels with success against the Palmyrenes' metal armor. The Palmyrenes fled into Emesa. Once more their leaders determined that it would be wisest to fall back, now to Palmyra. Zenobia was unable to remove her treasury from Emesa in the retreat, so that [Aurelian](#) took possession of it when he was welcomed into the city.

The *Historia Augusta* relates that [Aurelian's](#) forces were harried on their route to Palmyra by guerrilla bands of "Syrian brigands" (*HA Aurel.* 26.1); nevertheless the army crossed the arc of desert successfully and invested the city for a siege. Minor engagements of archery are mentioned, [\[\[42\]\]](#) but mostly the two sides settled in to await the other's running out of provisions. Finally, however, Zenobia set forth on camel-back to seek aid from the Persians. Aurelian sent horsemen after her; they captured her at the Euphrates.

During 272, as the dates on Alexandrian issues show, Antioch's and Alexandria's double-headed coins of Aurelian with Vaballathus cease, and new issues appear for Vaballathus and for Zenobia. [\[\[43\]\]](#) They follow the standard format of Roman imperial coins. Vaballathus assumes the emperor's radiate crown and Latin titlature *IM(perator) C(aesar) VHABALATHVS AVG(ustus)* on the antoniniani, the diadem and equivalent Greek titlature on the tetradrachms. Zenobia is entitled empress, *AVG(usta)* and *SEB(aste)*. Apart from the fundamental changes of titlature and type, the tetradrachms conform with other products of the Alexandrian mint, but the antoniniani spell Vaballathus's name differently, neglect the Antiochene mint's system of control marks, and use dumper flans: the discrepancies suggest that they were minted somewhere else, presumably after Aurelian recovered Antioch from the Palmyrenes. [\[\[44\]\]](#) If this inference is correct, it dates the first moment Zenobia and Vaballathus truly presented themselves as rebelling from Roman domination. Up until that point they had failed actually to consult Roman authority, but apparently expected that the Roman government would support the son to whose father it had granted authority over Roman affairs. Aurelian's reaction turned an irregular cooptation of Roman authority into a true revolt.

Aftermath

According to Zosimus, a faction of the Palmyrenes still wished to resist the Roman siege, but others, like the Antiochenes and the Emesans before them, surrendered and welcomed [Aurelian](#) gladly (*Zos.* 1.56.1). [Aurelian](#) displayed a good victor's clemency to the vanquished citizens and took possession of their gifts and the city's wealth. He returned to Emesa to try Zenobia and her adherents. Most were executed, including the sophist Longinus (*HA Aurel.* 30.3, *Zos.* 1.56.3). He evidently was one of the Greek intellectuals she patronized. Zenobia was reserved to be led in [Aurelian's](#) triumph at Rome in 274. Latin authors aver that she appeared in the triumph, and even that she lived thereafter in an estate at Tibur; [\[\[45\]\]](#) some of the Byzantine sources know this tradition, but also an alternative one that she died on the journey

west.[\[\[46\]\]](#) Vaballathus, unless he died on the route toward Rome (so Zos. 1.59.1), simply disappears from the sources. Presumably he did die, but not in any significant encounter. Meanwhile, the Egyptian campaign was concluded successfully in late spring or summer 272.[\[\[47\]\]](#)

Aurelian returned to Europe with his captives and booty. By December of 272 he won a victory over the Carpi along the Danube.[\[\[48\]\]](#) Word reached him there that the Palmyrenes had overthrown the garrison he left behind at Palmyra, and elevated a kinsman of Zenobia's as emperor. If the *Historia Augusta's* qualification of him as "parent" of Zenobia, despite the fact it names him Achilles (*HA Aurel.* 31.2), can legitimately be combined with Zosimus's information that the usurper was named Antiochus (Zos. 1.60.2), it would appear that the Palmyrenes elevated Zenobia's father to succeed her. If so, the Palmyrene revolt evidences an interesting path for dynastic authority to have followed: from Odaenathus to his son and widow, thence to her blood relative. Apparently no relation of Odaenathus remained at Palmyra. **Aurelian** marched back to Palmyra and quelled the second rebellion. An inscription outside the main entrance to the temple of the Palmyrene sun-god Bel records that some of the priests had supported Aurelian.[\[\[49\]\]](#) Its presence refutes Zosimus's exaggerated claim that Aurelian razed Palmyra (Zos. 1.61.1), but the city thereafter remained relatively obscure.

The Palmyrene revolt has been claimed to illustrate a strong sense of regional loyalty reemerging from under Roman dominance in the third century, and asserting itself against Roman suzerainty.[\[\[50\]\]](#) But it would be better seen as a partnership gone awry. Palmyrene power grew up, especially under Odaenathus's leadership, partly because the city marshalled great economic and military robustness, but also because Palmyra's interests were married to Rome's. **Gallienus** not only allowed, but even rewarded, Odaenathus's initiative in pursuing the two sets of goals together. Odaenathus was able to invoke the prestige of his Roman honors in the view of Palmyra's neighbors and true competitors. A year or two after Odaenathus died, Zenobia and Vaballathus felt the need to invoke the language of Roman authority for themselves, apparently against hostile neighbors; they also appropriated the mechanisms of Roman power, especially the Roman coinage and the provincial coinage of Egypt. The way they used titulature of Vaballathus on the coinage suggests that they sought only to exploit established channels of authority to their own benefit, but in so doing they assumed too much, and provoked **Aurelian's** response. He in turn forced the Palmyrenes into true rebellion. By suppressing them, along with the "Gallic empire",[\[\[51\]\]](#)**Aurelian** recentered the power of Roman empire. The fact that he was called upon to do so illustrates that it had effectively monopolized structures of power in the Mediterranean basin.


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