

# *Palmyra: The Desert Metropolis That Saved Rome*

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On May 15th, 2015, the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, also called ISIS), a Sunni Muslim extremist group, began its invasion of a small town in Syria known as Tadmur. More commonly known as Palmyra in the West, Tadmur was soon subjected to one of the worst cases of cultural destruction in modern history, with ISIS fighters destroying the Palmyrene ruins just half a kilometer outside of the city. Temples, statues, and other artifacts were all destroyed to crack down on the “paganism” that such structures represented<sup>[1]</sup>. Khaled al-Assad, a leading scholar on Palmyra, was soon taken by ISIS and interrogated on the location of the remaining artifacts of the city. Assad refused to reveal the locations of the artifacts he had hidden and was soon executed by the terrorist organization for his dedication to the protection of Syrian heritage<sup>[2]</sup>. His martyrdom for Palmyra captured headlines across the world, both for the barbarism in his killing but also for bringing attention to the plight of the ancient city he loved so dearly. Just as Palmyra had been during the height of European colonialism and excavations in the Middle East, the great city was once again the center of Western attention. Despite the attention, it was not understood by many the stature of a place like Palmyra, and why its destruction and looting hurt not just Syria, but the region as a whole. Palmyra was and is far more than a ruin or a remnant of the past, it is a testament to the glory of Levantine civilization and was one of the greatest cities of the Roman World. It is a city that, to this day, is a symbol of

pride for much of the Arab world even outside of Syria, and its rise and fall would have long-lasting consequences for not just the Levant, but the entire Roman Empire.

The city of Palmyra began as a settlement in Central Syria, with evidence of settlement starting from the Paleolithic period, consolidating more in the Neolithic period<sup>[3, p7]</sup>. Unlike many of the other cities of the ancient Levant, Palmyra was not situated on the fertile Euphrates valley like the Mesopotamian city-state of Mari, nor was it one of the many cities close to the Mediterranean, such as the Phoenician city-state of Tyre. Rather, the city was located deep within the Syrian desert, far from the lush regions of the Fertile Crescent. This, however, did not cut off Palmyra's access to water, as it was positioned near a major oasis<sup>[4]</sup>. It is this oasis that Palmyra/Tadmur gets its name from, with the term "Tadmur" being a modified form of the Semitic root word for palm trees that could grow thanks to the water the oasis provided<sup>[3, p7]</sup>. Palmyra is mentioned several times in documents starting from the Bronze Age, with a common theme being its constant conflict with raiding nomads, who originated from several different ethnic backgrounds<sup>[5]</sup>. The region Palmyra is situated in was subject to numerous migrations across the Bronze and Iron age, such as the Amorites and the Arameans, and this seems to have contributed to the city's metropolitan character, as it seems no one ethnicity defined Palmyrene civilization<sup>[6]</sup>. Following Alexander's Conquests and the beginning of the Diadochi period, the Levant underwent a process of Hellenization by the Seleucid Empire. During this period, several cities across the Fertile Crescent began to adopt Greek deities, culture, and the Greek language itself from Antioch to Seleucia to Spasinou Charax. It is here too that Palmyra separated itself from the other major cities of its region, with it being one of the few that was not founded or refounded by Alexander or one of his generals, with no evidence of a major settlement of Greek veterans within Palmyra, as had been done in other cities<sup>[3, p8]</sup>. This made Palmyra a uniquely

Syrian city, and while it certainly was not free from the Hellenization that characterized the Diadochi period, it maintained its own distinctive culture and its native language, Palmyrene Aramaic<sup>[7][8][9]</sup>.

It was in this context that the Romans occupied the city following the end of the Seleucid Empire. Its position on the border with the new Parthian Empire, on top of the fact it was now officially part of Rome, added to Palmyra's incredible metropolitan and diverse atmosphere. At the center of Palmyra was the great Temple of Bel, a sanctuary dedicated to the Mesopotamian god. Bel, a term meaning lord or master in Akkadian is a cognate with the Phoenician Ba'al, who was also a central deity worshiped primarily in the Levant and Carthage<sup>[10]</sup>. While the term Bel was used throughout the Semitic world, in the case of Palmyra, the term seems to specifically refer to the Babylonian patron god, Marduk, as opposed to other deities who had similar titles such as Ishtar and Nabu. Bel also seemed to be in something of a trinity with the native Syrian gods Aglibol and Yarhibol, who together formed the three primary patrons of the city<sup>[11, p1]</sup>. While the three chief gods were all of more or less native origin (All of them originated either from either the Levant or Mesopotamia, the two regions Palmyra sat between), this did not mean they didn't have several other foreign cultures influence them as well. The Temple of Bel itself was built in a Greek style, mimicking the Greek Temple of Artemis in the city of Magnesia in modern-day Turkey, with the temple built in a Pseudoperipteral style that was characteristic of Greco-Roman architecture in Antiquity<sup>[3, p43]</sup>. The Temple of Bel featured towering columns and beautifully decorated reliefs depicting the deities of the Palmyran pantheon. The influence did not stop there, however. It is known that Greco-Roman deities were worshiped widely throughout the Roman Near East, with Palmyra being no exception. Bilingual inscriptions in Greek and Aramaic indicate that the deity known as Elqonera was directly identified with the

Greek deity Poseidon, meaning Palmyra was incorporating Greco-Roman gods into its pantheon, as to be expected following centuries of Seleucid and Roman rule<sup>[11, p25]</sup>. Indeed, despite what some may assume about Palmyra (and other cities on the frontiers of the Roman Empire), many Palmyrans considered themselves entirely Roman. When Emperor Hadrian visited the Syrian city, the Palmyrans insisted on calling themselves “Hadrianopolitans” and claimed that their city had been “founded anew” by Hadrian<sup>[3, p91][13, p75]</sup>.

The Palmyrans had good reason to feel this way about their Roman rulers, as the city had now grown to new heights, even overtaking the wealthy city of Petra in importance as one of the key cities of the Roman Near East<sup>[14]</sup>. By the time the city had reached its peak in the middle of the Second Century, Palmyra became a quintessential Roman city, with all that entails. It had an Agora, baths, an amphitheater, and a garrison of Roman troops<sup>[3, p51][13, p75]</sup>. Through the center of the city ran the Grand Colonnade, stretching from the Temple of Bel in the East to the Funerary Temple in the West. It is this colonnade that itself represents the unique position of Palmyra, with a temple to a Mesopotamian god in the East and a Hellenic funerary temple in the West. The Funerary Temple was based on Greco-Roman architectural designs and likely contained Palmyrans of high social status<sup>[7][15][16]</sup>. Just to the South of the Funerary Temple was the Roman garrison of the city, adjacent to the Temple to Allat, an Arabian goddess<sup>[7][13, p46-47]</sup>. In a way, it is poetic how this colonnade could so perfectly illustrate the two worlds that Palmyra was caught between, its position between the cultures of the “East” and the cultures of the “West”.

Palmyrene burial evidence seems to show the increasing influence of Roman culture, such as Roman portrait styles and the aforementioned use of Greco-Roman architecture in funerary structures. At the same time, it retains several Near Eastern artistic aspects, such as more stylized eyebrows and the use of Persian clothing<sup>[16]</sup>. Inscriptions around the area are

written in Palmyrene Aramaic, Greek, and Latin, indicating the presence of a truly multilingual society<sup>[7][16]</sup>. Of these inscriptions, many are bilingual texts that feature Aramaic and Greek, with Latin being rarer in usage, which is expected for a city of the Roman Near East. The presence of Allat as a worshipped god in Palmyra, along with following general trends of Arab migration patterns during this period, would indicate that the area around Palmyra likely contained a sizable Arab population, some of whom lived within the city itself. While Arabic, at this point in history, was not commonly written down, the language was presumably spoken on the streets of Palmyra but never overtook Aramaic as the primary language of the city. While Palmyra's possible Arab character has been a source of debate, the Arab element Palmyrene society possessed is undeniable regardless of whether they had assimilated into the Aramaic-speaking culture<sup>[3, p47][16]</sup>. Greek sources also point to the existence of a large Jewish community in Palmyra, further proving the extent of the ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity that this desert metropolis facilitated<sup>[16]</sup>. In addition, the city had citizen assemblies, magistrates, and, of course, a senate<sup>[3, p37][17]</sup>. While these indicated the imposition of Roman political structures on Palmyra, it still retained its own unique characteristics. For example, the "Senate" was, in reality, more of a council of unelected tribal leaders, each belonging to the largest tribes that formed the elite core of Palmyra<sup>[17]</sup>. It was no doubt a Roman city, but it was a Roman city on its own terms, and this is what made Palmyra truly distinctive from other cities of its time.

Palmyra's geographical position not only facilitated such a diverse metropolitan atmosphere but also gave the city immense importance both militarily and economically. On the economic level, Palmyra's location provided the perfect midway point between the great cities of the East Mediterranean to the lucrative trade routes across the border into the Parthian (Later Sassanid) Empire and beyond into Asia. This made Palmyra a major trading hub, and this was

the primary reason the city had developed so quickly<sup>[4][16]</sup>. However, this very same position also made it of extreme military importance. Being located within the Syrian desert, Palmyra was almost perfectly placed next to the border with the Persians, making it within striking distance of the Persian capital, Ctesiphon. Its proximity to Persian-controlled Mesopotamia made it one of the most threatened cities in Eastern Rome, but it also made it an important Roman military garrison when at war with the Persians. Palmyrenes even served in the Roman military, with the *Numerus Palmyrenorum Sagittariorum* (Palmyrene Archers) having been a known Roman unit serving in the province of Dacia<sup>[3, p95]</sup>. Indeed, Palmyra, and the region of Syria as a whole, was known for its elite archer units<sup>[3, p17]</sup>. In Persia, the ruling Parthian Empire had now been overthrown by the new Sassanid Dynasty under Ardashir I in 224. This sent shockwaves across the region, signaling the beginning of a new military power that would soon end the period of relative peace with Rome that had existed for some time, bringing the greatest Eastern threat that Rome had faced up to that point in its history.

The rise of Sassanid Persia could not have come at a worse time for Rome, which was now entering the period referred to as the Crisis of the Third Century. With the assassination of Emperor Severus Alexander, Rome was plunged into a period of political, social, and economic turmoil due to numerous factors, from plagues to barbarian incursions to an uncontrollable military that resulted in at least 26 people claiming the title of Emperor<sup>[18][19]</sup>. It was in this great period of Roman weakness that the Sassanids sensed their opportunity to strike at a seemingly dying empire, a moment in which it truly seemed as if the Roman East would come to an end. In 239, the Roman-Syrian city of Dura-Europos was captured under the new Shanhanshah Shapur I, as well as trading stations across the Euphrates, severely harming the Palmyrene economy<sup>[4][13, p75]</sup>. Prior to this invasion, the Persians had already restricted trade in major Persian Gulf trading

hubs such as Spasinou Charax (In modern Iraq) in an attempt to further harm the economy of the Roman East. In a time of great crisis, it was one Septimius Odaenathus who was appointed as “Exarchos of the Palmyrenes”<sup>[3, p107-108]</sup>, a decision that would forever change the history of the region, and the Roman Empire as a whole.

Odaenathus was a Roman citizen and prominent noble in Palmyra, likely of mixed Arab/Aramean ancestry<sup>[13, p75][20]</sup>. In 250 A.D., Odaenathus and his son Hairan (also called Septimius Herodianus) became the first Palmyrenes to ever be elected to the Roman senate, a feat exemplifying his influence and popularity but also the increasing importance of Palmyra in the politics of Rome. By 257 A.D., Odaenathus had been effectively declared governor of all of Syria Phoenice by Emperor Valerian, with him now planning a major offensive against their hated Persian rivals<sup>[3, p108]</sup>. The campaign, intended to strike the Sassanids in Northern Mesopotamia, ended in complete disaster. At the Battle of Edessa, the Roman army of around 70,000 men was utterly defeated by a force led by Shapur I, resulting in the capture of Valerian<sup>[3, p108][20][21]</sup>. The significance of this moment cannot be overstated; in the midst of one of Rome’s worst periods of turmoil, their very own emperor had been captured by their bitter rivals. With the ascension of Gallienus following Valerian’s capture and eventual execution, Odaenathus was now tasked with protecting the East as the West was consumed by civil unrest. Due to the unrest, Gallienus never traveled to the Eastern Front, despite the new Persian offensive into Syria and Anatolia<sup>[3, p109]</sup>.

Odaenathus had assembled a small but elite party of Palmyrene soldiers in one last attempt to defend Roman Syria from the Sassanids. The army had been modeled on the Parthian military, another one of those Eastern influences that Palmyra had retained, giving Palmyra heavily armored cavalry and thousands of tribal horse-archers<sup>[22, p25]</sup>. In a stunning turn of events,

the Palmyrene Army defeated the Sassanids and not only drove them out of Syria but began to move into Mesopotamia and approach Ctesiphon itself<sup>[20]</sup>. Thanks to the efforts of Odaenathus and Palmyra, Syria would continue to survive as a Roman province, preventing the seemingly unstoppable Persian force from sweeping the entire East. It was for this reason that Odaenathus was given the title “Corrector Totius Orientis”, Corrector of the East, now second only to the Emperor himself. He also adopted the title “King of Kings”, a clear slight to the Persian title “Shahanshah” of the same meaning. In addition, Palmyra was given the status of a *Metrocolonia*, meaning it was now considered the most important city in the Province of Syria Phoenice<sup>[3, p109-110]</sup>. As Odaenathus was preparing for a second campaign, however, he was assassinated in the year 267, along with his eldest son Hairan<sup>[3, p110][20]</sup>. Next in line of succession was the underage Wallhabat, who was too young to rule. It was at this moment that Odaenathus’ wife, Zenobia, took over on behalf of Wallhabat, becoming the Queen of Palmyra<sup>[23]</sup>.

Septimia Zenobia, known in her native Aramaic as Bat Zabbai (Daughter of Zabbai), was born sometime around the 230s or 240s and was a speaker of Aramaic, Greek, Latin, and even Egyptian<sup>[13, p76][24]</sup>. She was Odaenathus’ second wife, being the mother of only the young Wallhabat<sup>[3, p108]</sup>. Initially, Zenobia had stuck to Odaenathus’ plan of simply being a Roman client, helping to protect the empire from its Eastern neighbors, particularly Persia. She had made Wallhabat inherit the titles of “King of Kings” (Mlk Mlk’ in Palmyrene inscriptions) and Corrector of the East from his father, keeping in line with his policies. These titles were not considered to be a threat to Rome, due to their inherently subordinate nature to the title Augustus, making Palmyra still second in power to the government of Rome. Indeed, Greek inscriptions in Palmyra dated between 268 and 270 C.E. show us that Zenobia was considered *Basilisses* (Queen) and *Metros tou Basileous* (Mother of the King), but never Augusta [3, p112].



This however, changed by 272 C.E. when Latin inscriptions in Palmyra indicate that Zenobia had assumed the title of Augusta and her son Augustus, a clear message to the Romans that Palmyra was no longer part of the Empire<sup>[3, p113]</sup>.

This new Palmyrene Empire quickly established its hold across the Roman East, taking everything between Egypt and Cappadocia. Indeed, Palmyrene coinage has been excavated in Antioch, Alexandria, and several other Eastern cities<sup>[3, p114][18]</sup>. These coins bore the faces of Wallhabat and Zenobia, with Zenobia's face being engraved in a similar style to Cleopatra, which seemed to indicate her intention to be perceived as an Empress. With a Roman response to the Palmyrene rebellion imminent, Zenobia elevated her son to the highest title, *imperator*, making his full name "Imperator Ceasar Lucius Julius Aurelius Septimius Vaballathus Athendorus Persicus maximus Arabicus maximus Adiabenicus maximus pius felix Invictus Augustus", a clear act of defiance against the Empire<sup>[3, p115]</sup>. However, the Emperor, Aurelian, had begun his march to Syria, preparing to snuff out this rebellion and unify the Empire after Rome had now been split into three states: the Gallic Empire, the Roman Empire, and the Palmyrene Empire<sup>[19]</sup>. The Palmyrene forces were no match for the Roman force, and this Palmyrene Empire was fully annexed, having only lasted for a few years<sup>[24]</sup>.

The events of the Third Century Crisis in Roman Syria, which should have brought down the Roman Empire in the East, turned into an important moment for Rome to recover and restructure itself thanks to the Palmyrene defense of the Levant. While Palmyra's rebellion has been the focus of much of popular imagery on the Third Century Crisis, it ignores that Palmyra had first saved the Empire from a Sassanid invasion that would have entirely changed the course of history. One must consider the consequences of Palmyra's last stand and how much of an effect it had on world history. At the time of the Sassanid Invasion, Christianity still had not been

adopted as the state religion of the Roman Empire, and the provinces Palmyra had defended were some of the richest, most valuable provinces in the entire Roman Empire. How different would history have been without the efforts of Palmyra? One can only guess, but it is clear that in any case, this oasis city had a monumental impact on the history of the Roman Empire. Palmyra's independent rule during Zenobia and its self-reliance during Odaenathus' rule helped pave the way for Diocletian's eventual establishment of the tetrarchy. One could argue that Palmyra's semi-independent rule had proven the efficiency of localized rule, which had after all prevented the collapse of the Roman Empire in the Near East. This experiment in local autonomy can be considered, in many ways, a predecessor to the tetrarchy.

Today, Palmyra's story has been manipulated to suit the ideologies of various competing governments and organizations. To the Europeans of the 18th and 19th centuries, Palmyra represented yet another mystical city of the Orient, ruled by its fabulous Queen, Zenobia, and Europeans seemed to have very little respect for the modern people of Tadmur and saw them as beneath their ancestors<sup>[25]</sup>. In the Arab world, specifically in Syria, Palmyra's rebellion has been turned into a story of indigenous Arab triumph over the colonizing Roman Empire; an ancient parallel to the anti-colonial struggles of the Middle East<sup>[26]</sup>. However, neither of these approaches reflect the reality of Palmyra, or why it is so important to the history of the Near East. What both of these interpretations are missing is that at its core, Palmyra was a *Roman* city, a splendidly unique one. Palmyra was something far greater than a rebellious oriental town; it was the magnificent metropolis of the Syrian desert that saved Rome and changed history forever.

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