



The Palmyrene Queen:  
Empress Zenobia's  
Rise to Power, 267

**ZENOBIA**

**MUNUC 37**

Model United Nations of the University of Chicago

## CHAIR LETTER

Dear Delegates,

My name is Ryanne and I am happy to welcome you to MUNUC 37 and The Palmyrene Queen: Empress Zenobia's Rise to Power. I will be your Chair for committee and touchpoint for all things front room, working alongside our incredible Crisis Directors, Esther and Andrew.

I am currently a third-year at UChicago, double majoring in Political Science and Law, Letters, and Society. I hope to go onto law school after graduation, focusing on criminal and public defense work, or international law (who knows!). Outside of MUNUC, I work on our Undergraduate Law Magazine and do set design for our theater group on campus. I love crocheting and knitting to unwind, but also play some games like Stardew or Animal Crossing!

In committee, we are excited for you to navigate the Roman Era from a non-Roman perspective. Often, ancient history is taught with everything in terms of the Roman Empire. Leaning into Empress Zenobia's rise to power and the expansion of the Palmyrene polity confronts this centrality. We can't wait to see how you develop creative story arcs and collaborate to forward the Empress Zenobia's goals, while exploring antiquity from a new light.

As your committee execs, we are here to support you and make sure you feel comfortable throughout the conference. Whether this is your first time in crisis, your first Model UN, or you're a seasoned MUN participant, we hope you leave with an enjoyable experience and increased confidence in your Model UN skills.

Please don't hesitate to reach out with any questions!

Your Chair,

Ryanne Leonard

[rgleonard@uchicago.edu](mailto:rgleonard@uchicago.edu)

## CRISIS DIRECTOR LETTERS

Dear delegates,

Welcome to MUNUC 37 and The Palmyrene Queen: Empress Zenobia's Rise to Power committee. I'm Esther Kassel, and I'll be your Co-Crisis Director (CD) along with your wonderful Chair, Ryanne Leonard, and my fantastic co-CD, Andrew Bailey. A bit about me: I'm a fourth-year from Madison, Wisconsin, a Virgo, and a long-time Model UN enthusiast. I'm currently double majoring in Mathematics and Inquiry and Research in the Humanities (IRHUM)—a create-your-own-major program, look it up!—with a focus on the history of ancient mathematics and education in antiquity. Outside of Model UN, I love to watch films with happy endings, indulge in YouTube video essays, and participate sometimes in the University of Chicago's own figure-drawing club.

We are thrilled to engage all of you with this unique perspective of ancient history, with a strong, independent queen leading the path ahead. There is no doubt that there will be turmoil from the powers surrounding Palmyra as well as internal social and political conflict, but we have faith that Zenobia's court will take on these challenges with confidence and grace.

In the months leading up to the conference, I encourage you to familiarize yourself with the idea of crisis notes, crisis arcs, and directives (something we will discuss before the committee begins but it will be helpful for all involved if you familiarize yourself with the concepts beforehand!). Your involvement with the backroom is integral for moving your agenda forward and impacting the frontroom's course of action. As your CD, I'm excited to engage with you through your crisis notes and front room breaks. I can't wait to see all of your creative ideas put into action during the weekend of the committee!

If you have any questions or concerns about MUNUC, the committee, or anything else MUN-related, please feel free to reach out.

Your CD,

Esther Kassel

[ekassel@uchicago.edu](mailto:ekassel@uchicago.edu)

Dear Delegates,

My name is Andrew Bailey and it is my pleasure to welcome you to The Palmyrene Queen: Empress Zenobia's Rise to Power at MUNUC 37! I will be your Crisis Director (CD) for this committee, along with my fabulous co-CD Esther and our phenomenal chair Ryanne. I will be responsible for everything happening in the backroom, including responding to your notes and planning crisis breaks based on your directives. I am a fourth year from Greenwich, Connecticut, and I am currently majoring in Mathematics with a minor in History. History has always been a passion of mine, so being involved in the oldest committee ever run by MUNUC is really special to me, and I am excited to see what you guys come up with in both frontroom and backroom!

My Model UN journey started in college, when my friend and co-CD Esther asked me to help her come up with committee ideas for MUNUC 35. This led to my role as Assistant Chair (AC) on the Friends and Advisors of Empress Matilda committee. Last year, I was a CD on The Golden Age of Florence: Cabinet of Lorenzo de Medici, 1470 committee, and I also served as CD on The Emperor's New Groove: Pachacuti's Council, 1440 AD at ChoMUN. Outside of Model UN, I am a classical pianist, I'm obsessed with the show Community, and I love to ski.

I encourage you all to read the background guide as you prepare for the conference. I would also encourage you all to practice writing crisis notes and to start thinking about potential crisis arcs. We will review these concepts before the committee begins, but any additional review you guys can do will be beneficial to making this committee run as smoothly as possible. It is my goal to make this committee as exciting, engaging, and inclusive as possible, and to ensure that each of you learns about this fascinating period while having fun during the conference. I cannot wait to see what you guys come up with over the course of the committee!

If you have any questions about MUNUC, the committee, or anything else, please don't hesitate to reach out to any of us. We can't wait to see you all at the conference!

Your CD,

Andrew Bailey

[agbailey@uchicago.edu](mailto:agbailey@uchicago.edu)

## COMMITTEE STRUCTURE AND MECHANICS

The Palmyrene Queen: Empress Zenobia's Rise to Power is structured as a continuous crisis committee with both frontroom and backroom mechanics. While your execs will go more in depth into crisis mechanics at conference, we will provide an overview of both frontroom and backroom to guide your preparation for committee.

In frontroom, the chair serves the role of Empress Zenobia as the delegates come together as her trusted advisors. As the committee starts when the Empress first rises to power, the goal for delegates should be to advise the Empress on stabilizing her position and fostering a rich, multiethnic and intellectual culture throughout the newfound Palmyrene Empire. Each delegate is given a character from the time period with a unique position and relationship to Empress Zenobia. The committee is composed of a wide array of specialties: some act as philosophers and intellectuals, politicians, military officials, artists, and/or merchants and traders. With each role, delegates can leverage their skills and relationships to influence committee.

There are several frontroom mechanics that delegates can utilize to collaborate on and promote their ideas. Passing directives is one of the major ways to move the committee forward. Directives are plans of action that respond to either an immediate crisis or the larger committee goals. They are first drafted by small groups of delegates or 'blocs' during unmoderated caucuses, and then submitted to the chair once there are enough signatories— or supporters— of the draft directive. From here, there is opportunity for the bloc to present their directive to committee and enter into voting procedure, where that directive can either fail or pass depending on committee support. As mentioned earlier, unmoderated caucuses are great opportunities to start writing directives with other delegates, as delegates are free to walk around the room to discuss ideas. Moderated caucuses, in contrast, are blocks of time for delegates to give short speeches on a topic— these speeches can be spent



promoting a current directive being drafted, or bringing an idea or concern to the attention of the committee. While these are more formal procedures to engage with the committee, delegates can also pass notes to other delegates at any point.

Backroom, led by the crisis directors, is more individualized compared to frontroom. Delegates write notes to the backroom that detail personal actions or goals. While frontroom focuses on advising Empress Zenobia, backroom allows delegates to pursue their own goals, even if they are not in the committee's best interest. As delegates write notes, they receive responses from backroom on the results of their notes. Over the course of the committee, delegates create 'arcs' through their backroom notes, which can influence the frontroom committee through crisis breaks. Crisis directors can decide whether to break backroom notes, and there are numerous factors that go into this decision such as the trajectory of committee, directives, and the detailing of the notes. In general, a good backroom note contains a detailed plan of what the delegate hopes to achieve and how they can do it.

Delegates also have the opportunity to draft Joint Personal Directives (JPDs) that are sent to backroom. These are like backroom notes, but they come from multiple delegates and must receive a signature from all delegates involved. They result in immediate action, similar to frontroom directives, but it is at the discretion of the backroom to whether they are passed.

## Statement of the Problem

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Julia Aurelia Zenobia, the wife of Odaenathus, founder of the Palmyrene Empire and ruler of the Roman East, is destined for greatness. Alongside her husband, she is prepared to juggle the responsibilities of a leader of a diverse population, gracefully balancing eastern and western religious and political traditions. At the same time, she has been accumulating political and military responsibilities that will determine the fate and reputation of her empire and birthplace.

As an oasis on the Silk Road, Palmyra boasts a religious and socially diverse community of travelers and citizens alike. The “melting pot” population has allowed for the city to thrive as an intellectual hotspot for philosophers, priests and politicians. Furthermore, the continuous exchanges between the various populations has created a tolerant and polylingual environment, accepting of all those passing through and residing within. Zenobia values the diversity of her community and the intellectual environment it has fostered. Thus, her cabinet—which predominantly reflects her preference of philosophy and intellectualism—must consider the wider social, cultural and religious diversity thriving within Palmyra and even outside the city’s borders.

Throughout the first and second centuries, the cultural development of the city was determined by various surrounding influences, including the Hellenic society to the west and the Parthians to the east.<sup>1</sup> In particular, Neoplatonism—a popular movement surrounding new interpretations of Plato’s work—has begun to spread from philosophical movements in the Roman Empire into Syria. Within this movement is a resurgence of interest in mathematical and scientific learning. As a well-taught individual herself, Zenobia seeks to promote education and intellectualism throughout her empire.

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<sup>1</sup>Udo Hartmann. “Palmyra.” In *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Greece and Rome*. Oxford University Press, 2010. <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195170726.001.0001/acref-9780195170726-e-920>.

However, the Palmyrene Empire sits between two empirical powerhouses, the Roman Empire and the Persian Empire, now led by the Sasanian Dynasty. The expansive Roman Empire boasts architectural and cultural growth, but the political and consequential economic instability has been on the rise. The so-called Gallic Roman Empire has broken off from the western territories of the Roman Empire, leaving the Palmyrene Empire one of its largest provinces. At the same time, the Crisis of the Third Century, known also as the Military Anarchy, has affected internal politics, causing distrust and division within the Roman political sphere. In Palmyra, Roman strategos—military forces—still occupy the eastern border of the city. As of now, the Roman Empire places trust and confidence in Odaenathus' reign, establishing itself as the Palmyrene Empire's most powerful ally—but for how much longer?

In the east, the Sasanian Dynasty had overthrown the Parthians, turning a once-peaceful ally of the Palmyrenes into a formidable enemy. After failing to establish an amicable relationship with the leader Shapur, an enemy of the Roman Empire, both Palmyrenes and Sasanians have been subject to invasions and battles on both sides. Most notably, when Shapur captured the then-Roman Emperor Valerian, Odaenathus fought and won against the Sasanians, in a demonstration of military strength to the eastern empire and loyalty to the Roman Empire. As both sides are vying for territorial gains in the Syrian region, Zenobia has found herself aware of the socioeconomic decay caused by the increasing hostility and obstruction to travelers on the Silk Road. As Palmyra has thrived economically and socially as a caravan city from its conception, Zenobia and her cabinet must grapple with the eastern conflicts and its impacts on the empire's historically diverse economic sphere.

Among the great powers of antiquity, the Palmyrene Roman province stands among them. However, with a politically crumbling ally to the west and an ever-encroaching enemy to the east, Zenobia and her cabinet must strategically uplift her empire, while avoiding complete economic and territorial annihilation.

# HISTORY OF THE PALMYRENE EMPIRE

## Political History

The settlement of Palmyra was old when Rome was young. First settled by Arabs indigenous to Syria, the settlement went by its Arabic name, Tadmor, the name used by the present-day city.<sup>2</sup> However, around 1000 BCE, a great upheaval occurred. The Arameans, a nomadic people, gradually invaded Syria, naming it Aram.<sup>3</sup> This change had enduring effects, as Aramaic was spoken throughout Syria and Mesopotamia up until the 7th century CE, when Arabic became the primary language spoken in the Middle East.<sup>4</sup> This meant that the Syrian and Mesopotamian civilizations spoke the Aramaic language despite conquest by three empires: the Persian, then the Greeks, then the Romans.<sup>5</sup> While the settlement around 1000 BCE was prosperous, it was not yet the great city it would later become. The city that would later emerge was likely formed by Aramean and Arab tribes.<sup>6</sup> Palmyra, at this point, had become a beacon of tolerance, each tribe maintaining its ancestral sanctuary and the plurality of divinities, coexisting peacefully, even when conflict arose.<sup>7</sup>

Recent excavations of the city reveal much about life in Palmyra. Archaeologists have discovered streets and homes lined up between the Great Colonnade and the current town.<sup>8</sup> With the layout of its houses, the architecture of its monuments, and its quality of life, Palmyra equaled or surpassed the leading civilizations of its time.<sup>9</sup> Despite the spoken language being primarily Aramaic, the Greek Empire had a strong influence on the

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<sup>2</sup>Paul Veyne. *Palmyra: An Irreplaceable Treasure*. Translated by Teresa Lavender Fagan. Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 29

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 30.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 30.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 13.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 14.

architecture of the city. Simply put, the more important a building, the more Greek it was.<sup>10</sup> The city of Palmyra was predominantly inhabited by landowners who spent what they earned off of their land in the rural territories, their domestic servants, and merchants who would supply their wares.<sup>11</sup> However, what is particularly special about Palmyra is that the grand, fancy houses were not inhabited by the city's elite. Rather, they were the homes of agents of the caravan business, for after all, Palmyra was a city of traders. Within the city, Greek was spoken as the language of the elites, while in the surrounding territories (surviving the imposition of Greek), Aramaic was the language of the masses.<sup>12</sup> The poor of the city included those who served in domestic labor, while the truly poor lived outside of the city, working the land as peasants.<sup>13</sup> Palmyra typically traded with Alexandria, with the rest of its goods going to Petra and Batnaya, where the Silk Road went into the Roman province of Anatolia.<sup>14</sup>

Palmyra was nominally conquered by Rome in the mid-60s BCE during the campaigns of Pompey the Great.<sup>15</sup> While it might seem strange that a Roman Emperor would have interest in a city in the middle of the desert, which cannot produce the resources its inhabitants need to survive, it is important to remember that “Palmyra was no disconnected island but was rather a node, an important player in the interregional infrastructure that connected East and West, and it had held this role long before the Romans truly turned their attentions eastward.”<sup>16</sup> Though under the rule of the Caesars, Palmyrenes certainly did not consider themselves Roman. They retained their civic identity throughout this period.<sup>17</sup> However, due to a number of key events in which Roman interests were intricately interwoven with the Near East, Palmyra was designated a

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 14.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 17.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 16.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 17.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 18–19.

<sup>15</sup> Rubina Raja. *Pearl of the Desert: A History of Palmyra*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2022.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 10.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 11.

Roman province in 64 BCE.<sup>18</sup> During the Roman civil wars that racked these centuries, the Near East held huge strategic importance to the Empire, as many of the wars played out in places far from the City of Rome.<sup>19</sup> Now having officially become a subject of the Caesars, the city consecrated a monument to the divinized Emperors. However, more honorific than religious, these structures imply that no one in Palmyra took this display of loyalty seriously.<sup>20</sup> By the year 75 CE at the latest, Palmyra designated itself as a *polis*, or “city-state”. Modeling itself after Greek and Roman cities, this meant that it was governed by a president or *proedros*, a council, an assembly of citizens, two magistrates (called *archontes*), and a secretary of the council and the people.<sup>21</sup> While this may seem democratic, as is the case with most ancient democracies, political life was dominated by the wealthiest of the Palmyrenes.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Raja, *Pearl of the Desert*, 10.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Veyne, “*Palmyra*.” 31.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 31–32.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 32.



*Palmyra at its Greatest Extent, 271 AD<sup>23</sup>*

<sup>23</sup> Wikimedia Commons contributors, "File:Palmyrene Empire.png," Wikimedia Commons, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:Palmyrene\\_Empire.png&oldid=820514019](https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:Palmyrene_Empire.png&oldid=820514019) (accessed September 18, 2024).

## Geographical History

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The geography of Palmyra has played a large role in shaping the overall political, military, and socio-economic status of the now Roman city-state. Palmyra was established in the third millennium B.C.E. as the Arab settlement Tadmor around 100 miles from the modern day capital Damascus.<sup>24</sup> The expansive desert Palmyra resides includes regions in modern day Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and of course, Syria; moreover, the land lies between the Roman Empire to the west and the Sasanian Empire to the east.<sup>25</sup> Additionally, the city-state is bounded to the west and to the east by the Euphrates River and the Mediterranean Sea respectively.<sup>26</sup> The bodies of water provide little advantage to the residents and political figures of Palmyra, however, as both are roughly 200 miles from the city, with desert and mountain terrain in between.

In the middle of the mostly inhabitable Syrian desert, Palmyra sits as an oasis for its permanent residents and multitudes of travelers alike.<sup>27</sup> Unlike the treacherous elements surrounding it, the city provides self-sustaining fresh water and fertile land. In the first century CE, natural historian Pliny the Elder described the land and natural resources of Palmyra as an envy of both the Roman and Parthian<sup>28</sup> Empires.<sup>29</sup> The regions around the city are mountainous and the desert provides little nourishment, which encourages travelers from the Silk

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<sup>24</sup> Also known as Tudmur, Tadmor, or Tadmur (Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Palmyra." Encyclopedia Britannica, September 4, 2024. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Palmyra-Syria>.)

<sup>25</sup> Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Syrian Desert." Encyclopedia Britannica, February 14, 2024. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Syrian-Desert>.

<sup>26</sup> Britannica, "Palmyra."

<sup>27</sup> "Palmyra." History. A&E Television Networks, August 23, 2018. <https://www.history.com/topics/ancient-middle-east/palmyra>.

<sup>28</sup> The Parthians ruled over the Mediterranean, parts of India and China for almost 500 years until it was overthrown in 224 CE by the founder of the Sasanian Empire; A., Patrick Scott Smith, M.. "Parthia (Empire)." World History Encyclopedia. Last modified July 22, 2019. [https://www.worldhistory.org/Parthia\\_\(Empire\)/](https://www.worldhistory.org/Parthia_(Empire)/).

<sup>29</sup> Pliny *Historia Naturalis* 5.88; Pliny the Elder. The Natural History. Translated by John Bostock. London: Taylor and Francis, 1855.



Road to pass through Palmyra.<sup>30</sup> However, travelers are only allowed to pass through the city provided that they paid a fee.<sup>31</sup> Thus, the natural geographical environment of Palmyra and the surrounding inhabitable terrain became a necessary foundation for economic prosperity and social diversity.

When the Roman Empire conquered Syria in 64 BCE, Palmyra was established as a city-state of the Empire. Despite Palmyra's new political status, the city-state maintained the majority of its political autonomy and continued its activities as a prominent trading site, now with the continuously-expanding Empire as a major trading partner.<sup>32</sup> Palmyra's autonomy was short-lived, however, as the city-state was fully conquered by Emperor Tiberius in 14 CE and fell under complete Roman political control.<sup>33</sup> Quickly, the Roman Empire recognized the importance of establishing a military presence at Palmyra's eastern border between Rome and the Sassanid Empire; however, the desert terrain did not allow for static military defense, as a constant supply of sustenance and supplies was necessary and the environment provided very few natural barriers. Instead, the Romans adjusted to the challenging geography, establishing a communication route along the border and mobile defense forces. The continued Roman military presence on the eastern border enables foreign surveillance of Palmyra, however, it also provides the city-state with heightened security for the incoming caravans from the east.<sup>34</sup> While Palmyra was established as a humble colony, its geography and local resources allowed the city to thrive as a major Silk Road trade capital between two major empires, fostering a diverse citizenry and prosperous economy.

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<sup>30</sup>Steven John Holcomb.. "Palmyra's ephemeral empire by Steven John Holcomb." PhD diss. Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2016. <http://hdl.handle.net/1721.1/104498>.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup>History, "Palmyra."

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup>Holcomb, "Palmyra's ephemeral."

## Social History

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### Original Ethnic Groups

Starting as an oasis settlement, Palmyra's geography attracted pastoralists, settlers, and nomadic peoples alike. One of these groups were the Arameans, who were primarily nomadic pastoralists.<sup>35</sup> Indigenous to Mesopotamia and modern-day Syria, the Aramean language, Aramaic, became dominant in Palmyra in trade and civic affairs.

The Bene Komare was one of four main tribes settled in Palmyra, the name Komare being derived from Aramaic. Bene Mattabol was another Aramean tribe of Palmyra. The third tribe was the Bene Ma'zin: an Arabic tribe founded on goat herding. It is clear there was a fourth tribe in Palmyra's tribal confederation; although its identity is uncertain, some speculate it was the Mita tribe<sup>36</sup>.

Once loosely connected tribes surrounding the oasis became a developing and urbanized community under the name of the Palmyrene people. The opportunity for this was largely given by *Pax Romana* in the first century C.E., during which many familial tribes attached themselves to the oasis settlement and recognized the centrality of its authority.<sup>37</sup>

### Cultural Influences and the Palmyrene Identity

The city of Palmyra served as a center for trade and multicultural exchange, and likewise was influenced by the many cultures that passed through and surrounded the region. Most notable is the Greek and Hellenistic

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<sup>35</sup>"The Indigenous Origins of the Arameans of Upper Mesopotamia." World Council of Armenians. <https://wca-ngo.org/heritage/247-the-indigenous-origins-of-the-aramians-of-upper-mesopotamia>.

<sup>36</sup>"The Organization of the Palmyrene Society." Palmyra Archaeological Museum, October 15, 2021. <https://virtual-museum-syria.org/palmyra/the-organization-of-the-palmyrene-society/>.

<sup>37</sup>Andrew M. Smith, "Palmyrene Identity and Community: Continuity and Change." In *The Oxford Handbook of Palmyra*. Edited by Rubina Raja. Oxford Academic. 2024. doi: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190858117.013.6.

influence throughout the city, ubiquitous in its art, language, and architecture.<sup>38</sup> Its major temples and sanctuaries were designed with Greco-Roman elements, specifically Corinthian,<sup>39</sup> and the streets of Palmyra were adorned with over 1,500 Corinthian columns.<sup>40</sup> The presence of Greek and Hellenistic influences could not be found to this extent elsewhere in the Roman Empire.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, Palmyra was largely a bilingual city, with both Aramaic and Greek being widely used, as evidenced by inscriptions from the time.<sup>42</sup> Latin was relatively rare in comparison to these languages, which was also reflected in the population of Palmyra having a small population of Romans.

These influences permeated other areas of Palmyrene society, including the political community. The ‘council and the people’ of Palmyra created by the tribal federation was modeled after the Greek *polis* or city-state.<sup>43</sup>

Even though Palmyra’s location was relatively removed from the two empires to the East and West, Palmyrenes themselves were actively involved in abroad affairs. Many citizens served as diplomats and ambassadors abroad, as well as form merchant groups in both the Parthian and Roman empires. Yet, Palmyrenes still maintained a distinct cultural connection and identity with one another, primarily through speaking their native tongue and worshipping common deities.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Jean-Baptiste Yon. *Les notables de Palmyre*. Beyrouth: Presses de l’Ifpo, 2002. <https://doi.org/10.4000/books.ifpo.3763>.

<sup>39</sup> Jeffrey A. Becker, “Temple of Bel, Palmyra.” Smarthistory, August 8, 2015. <https://smarthistory.org/temple-of-bel-palmyra/>.

<sup>40</sup> Holcomb, “Palmyra’s ephemeral.”

<sup>41</sup> Andrew M. Smith, *Roman Palmyra: Identity, Community, and State Formation*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.

<sup>42</sup> Jean-Baptiste Yon, ‘A Bilingual World? Language and Epigraphy in Palmyra’, in Rubina Raja (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Palmyra*, Oxford Handbooks (2024; online edn, Oxford Academic, 23 Jan. 2024), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190858117.013.18>, accessed 15 Sept. 2024.

<sup>43</sup> Smith, “Community: Continuity and Change.”

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

## Religion

Palmyra theologically separated itself from Babylon, still following the religion of Baal and worshipping Marduk, but with distinct doctrinal differences. These differences generally gave women more independence than in other areas like Babylon. While Palmyra still worshiped Marduk, they adopted other deities into their worship, which came to be known together as The Sacred Palmyrene Trinity or Baal Shamin.

The Temple of Bēl (Baal) was Palmyra's central monument and place of worship, dedicated to the Baal Shamin along with the moon god Aglibol and the sun god Yahribol.<sup>45</sup> The Temple was also a place of congregation for the initially scattered tribes around the oasis, and represented the formation of a Palmyrene identity and community. A shared religious observance amongst the tribal confederation would be the glue to hold together the urbanizing oasis community. There were multiple other sanctuaries built to honor the religious observances of particular tribes, but the Temple of Bēl was the center of the Palmyrene identity.

## Tolerance

With Palmyra's unique situation in the crossroads of trade and culture, it has fostered a tolerant environment for ethnic, religious, and intellectual differences. Even though common religious observance brought Palmyra together as a political community, Palmyra grew to be a pluralistic society through its trade, integrating new enclaves of people into its population.<sup>46</sup> Indeed, Palmyra would serve as a sanctuary for many identities that were excluded from the surrounding empires, which would continue into the third century C.E.

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<sup>45</sup>Becker, "Temple."

<sup>46</sup>Tim Whitmarsh,. "Tolerant and multicultural, Palmyra stood for everything Isis hates." The Guardian. August 25, 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/aug/25/palmyra-tolerant-multicultural-isis-ancient-city-migrants-savagery>.

as the city supported a large Jewish population— substantiated by Palmyrene burial records<sup>47</sup>— and would become a haven for excommunicated Christians.<sup>48</sup>

## The Crisis of the Third Century

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The Crisis of the Third century was a prolonged period of infighting between emperors claiming power. The beginning of this crisis occurred when Septimus Severus bought the loyalty of the military by increasing their pay. To do this, he had to debase Roman currency by adding less precious metal to the coinage. While this initial debasement did not do any immediate harm, it allowed for subsequent emperors to do the same, cumulating the effect over time.<sup>49</sup> Kowtowing to the military also meant that the traditional role of the Emperor—dependent on strength and legitimacy—was now dependent on the support of the military to a much higher degree.<sup>50</sup> The last emperor of the Severan dynasty, Alexander, was dominated by his mother and grandmother throughout his reign. This caused bitterness within the Empire, as actions taken by Alexander during this time were seen to be weak and ineffectual, leading to him being assassinated by his own commanders.<sup>51</sup> The next slew of emperors became known as the “Barracks Emperors,” due to them coming from and being raised to power by the army. Now, the Emperor was chosen by the military based on his popularity with troops, generosity towards the military, and his ability to be proactive.<sup>52</sup> Between the reign of Alexander Severus and Diocletian, there were over 20 emperors who took the throne in quick succession. This led to a breakdown of Roman society and the Roman economy.

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<sup>47</sup> Javier Teixidor “Palmyra in the third century”. In Cussini, Eleonora (ed.). *A Journey to Palmyra: Collected Essays to Remember Delbert R. Hillers*. Brill. (2005).

<sup>48</sup> “The Rise and Fall of Palmyra: Part Two—The Fall.” The Antecedent (blog). WordPress. September 18, 2016. <https://www.theantecedent.com/the-rise-and-fall-of-palmyra-part-two-the-fall/>.

<sup>49</sup> Joshua J. Mark. “The Crisis of the Third Century.” World History Encyclopedia, November 9, 2017. [https://www.worldhistory.org/Crisis\\_of\\_the\\_Third\\_Century/](https://www.worldhistory.org/Crisis_of_the_Third_Century/).

<sup>50</sup> Ibid

<sup>51</sup> Ibid

<sup>52</sup> Ibid

In 260, this came to a head when the regional governor of Upper and Lower Germania, Postumus, created the Gallic empire, believing that he could do better for his subjects. While this may be seen as a rebellion against Roman Authority, Postumus justified his actions, saying that they were for the betterment of the Roman Empire. This period of political and military infighting period has severely weakened the Roman economy and caused the quality of life for Roman citizens to deteriorate. Despite this, the current Roman Emperor Gallienus has made an effort to enforce positive developments to the military and to the cultural sphere of Rome.<sup>53</sup> His recent efforts, however, have not addressed the tumultuous political environment.

## Biography of Empress Zenobia

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Julia Aurelia Zenobia was born in the city of Palmyra in 240 CE to a wealthy politician, Chief Amrou, son of Dharb.<sup>54</sup> While her father achieved a political position in Palmyra for the Roman Empire, it is said that her ancestors were of a ruling class.<sup>55</sup> Through her father's lineage, she gained Roman citizenship, although Rome had annexed the city a century prior.<sup>56</sup> Even in her adolescence, Zenobia was well-educated and exhibited impressive leadership skills. She was fluent in Egyptian and Aramaic and demonstrated proficiency in both Greek and Latin.<sup>57</sup> Additionally, as a child, she was given responsibility for her family's flock of sheep and the shepherds.

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid

<sup>54</sup> Joshua J. Mark. "Zenobia." World History Encyclopedia, September 14, 2014. <https://www.worldhistory.org/zenobia/>. Jameson, (Anna) Mrs. 1854. *Memoirs of Celebrated Female Sovereigns*. New York: Harper.

<sup>55</sup> Robert C. L. Holmes.. "Queen Zenobia of Palmyra: Facts & Accomplishments." 2020 The Collector, August 27, 2020. <https://www.thecollector.com/queen-zenobia-of-palmyra/>.

<sup>56</sup> Mark, "Zenobia."

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

She enjoyed outdoor activities, such as horseback riding and hunting, which provided her with the skills for her later experiences in battle.<sup>5859</sup>

Much of Zenobia's early experiences with political and military leadership were tied to her second husband, Lucius Septimus Odaenathus, who first established his career as the ruler of

Palmyra and eventually as the founder of the Palmyrene Empire. Like Zenobia, Odaenathus was born a Roman citizen in Palmyra, as he was the son of a ruling-class family. In 252, Odaenathus achieved the status of chief in Palmyra, and soon after, in 258, he achieved the position of consular—a high-status magistrate of the Roman Empire—and became the governor of Palmyra.<sup>60</sup> The purpose for Odaenathus'



family's political position in the Empire was a direct reaction to the Sasanians overthrowing the Parthians in southern Mesopotamia and Persia, cutting off Palmyra's access to the Persian Gulf.<sup>61</sup> When the Roman emperor

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<sup>58</sup> Mark, "Zenobia";

Robert C. L. Holmes. "Queen Zenobia of Palmyra: Facts & Accomplishments." *The Collector*, August 27, 2020. <https://www.thecollector.com/queen-zenobia-of-palmyra/>

<sup>59</sup> Harriet Hosmer. "Zenobia in Chains." Huntington Library and Gardens. 1859. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/stephanieasher/22596767193>

<sup>60</sup> The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. 2024. "Septimius Odaenathus." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, March 29, 2024. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Septimius-Odaenathus>; Roman Palmyra, Andrew Smith, 176-7.

<sup>61</sup> The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. "Septimius Odaenathus." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, March 29, 2024. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Septimius-Odaenathus>.

Valerian was captured by Shapur I, the Sasanian king of the Persian Empire, in 260, Odaenathus attacked the king and defeated his army swiftly, although failing to free Valerian from captivity.<sup>62</sup> In return for his loyalty during the emperor's kidnapping, the Empire provided Odaenathus with rulership over the entire eastern region of the Roman Empire. In 261, Odaenathus' loyalty was tested again when Valerian's son and Roman Emperor, Gallienus, was challenged by a usurper. As a response, Odaenathus defeated the usurper to cement Gallienus' power as emperor. Thereafter, Odaenathus was rewarded with the title of King of Palmyra and enough power to rule almost independently over his territories.<sup>63</sup> Together, Zenobia and Odaenathus are raising two sons, 10-year-old Vaballathus and Herodes, Odaenathus' son from his first wife and the prospective heir to his rule.<sup>64</sup>

Zenobia became so entangled with Odaenathus's rule, that she and her husband came to be considered 'joint rulers' of the Palmyrene Empire.<sup>65</sup> She often joined Odaenathus on his military campaigns and hunting excursions, which allowed her to forward her abilities militarily and politically, practicing the skills necessary for a strong and influential leader. Moreover, Zenobia became known for her support and advocacy of intellectual movements within her husband's court—as she embraced intellectual habits personally—as well as her fairness to the culturally diverse and multilingual citizens in the Empire.<sup>66</sup> While her husband is viewed by the Roman Empire as the sole ruler of the Palmyrene Empire, Zenobia is known by her citizens as a passionate intellectual, an advocate for all, and, most importantly, a capable and powerful leader.

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Joshua, "Zenobia."

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Mrs. Anna Jameson. *Memoirs of Celebrated Female Sovereigns*. New York: Harper. 1854. (58)

<sup>66</sup> Robert C. L. Holmes. "Queen Zenobia of Palmyra: Facts & Accomplishments." *The Collector*, August 27, 2020. <https://www.thecollector.com/queen-zenobia-of-palmyra/>



## CURRENT SITUATION

### The Roman Empire:

Between 253 CE to 267 CE, the Roman Empire fell into a state of political chaos. The emperor Valerian, along with his son and co-emperor Gallienus, ruled the disintegrating state, plagued all around by foreign invasions and internal confusion. Valerian led the charge against challenges in the East, while Gallienus spent most of his time on the Rhine, warring with the Goths, and in northern Italy, warring with the Alemanni.<sup>67</sup> Then, he turned his attention to the revolts of Ingenuus and Regalianus in Illyricum.

In June of 260, Valerian was taken prisoner by King Shāpūr I of Persia, and after he died in captivity, Gallienus took full control of the Empire. His ascent to power turned out to be catastrophic. However, Odaenathus, the governor of the eastern provinces, maintained his loyalty to Rome by defeating the Persian king and crushing the would-be usurper Quietus at Emesa.<sup>68</sup> The success was short-lived, however; the invading Germanic tribes had plundered the Rhine and Danube provinces, while the Persians inflicted similar damage on the East. In the end, Gallienus could only control the Italian peninsula and the Balkans.<sup>69</sup>

Gallienus and the Roman Empire continue to face pressure from external forces to territorial break-aways, yet have for the last five years maintained relative peace and stability throughout the empire.<sup>70</sup> Meanwhile, a young soldier by the name of Aurelian is swiftly climbing the military ranks.

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<sup>67</sup>Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Valerian." Encyclopedia Britannica, April 12, 2024.  
<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Valerian-Roman-emperor>.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid

<sup>69</sup> Ibid

<sup>70</sup> Ibid

## Political Structure of Palmyra

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### Urban and Rural

Palmyra's mixed economy in commercial trading, agriculture, and pastoralism would require any political body to address the interdependent needs of those markets and those engaged in their work. Moreover, many of those engaged in agriculture and pastoralism in the countryside were active in the tribal communities. Palmyra's political organization reflected this dynamic, as the city possessed most rural land but allowed tribes to retain power over such land through public institutions. In this way, Palmyra adapted to the demands of being a commercial center in adopting public civic institutions but also took to the interests of the countryside in having tribes be invested in those same institutions.<sup>71</sup>

The Palmyrene political structure again lends its development to influences from surrounding cultures and empires. The high regard for local rulers is one feature adopted from Palmyra's Persian neighbors.

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<sup>71</sup> Smith "Roman Palmyra," 104-105.



*Classical Palmyra Painting*<sup>72</sup>

## Economic Situation of Palmyra

Palmyra was an incredibly wealthy city, boasting an extremely high quality of life. Miles away from the Euphrates river, and even farther from the Mediterranean, no settlement would have been possible had Palmyra not had access to several springs supplying the Oasis. Due to its proximity and access to a reliable water source, they were able to amass a fortune in agriculture.<sup>73</sup> Despite its importance as a hub of trade and commerce, as well

<sup>72</sup> Anton Radl. "Bühnenbild Palmyra." (1852). *Painting sold at Dorotheum*.  
<https://boudewijnhuijgens.getarchive.net/amp/media/anton-radl-buhnenbild-palmyra-90a91e>

<sup>73</sup> Pat Southern, *Empress Zenobia: Palmyra's Rebel Queen* (London: Continuum, 2008), 18.

as its great wealth, the population of the city only numbered in the tens of thousands, with many Palmyrenes inhabiting the rural territory surrounding and belonging to the city.<sup>74</sup> This came as a result of the high cost of living. Water was a luxury item, and exorbitant taxes were imposed on those irrigating their fields using Palmyra's springs.<sup>75</sup> Furthermore, with the desert surrounding Palmyra being so sparse, its surrounding territories were not able to provide the city with everything they needed. While they could draw salt—an important tool for food preservation—from desert lagoons, Palmyrenes had to import other essentials, wheat, wine, and oil. Its land was suitable for raising goats and sheep for consumption, camels for caravans, and horses for the caravans' guards.<sup>76</sup> Under Roman rule, not much changed for the average Palmyrene citizen. Both Palmyra's great wealth and role as a connection point for the Silk Road meant that they could preserve their autonomy.<sup>77</sup> Thus, even through the beginning stages of the Crisis of the Third century, where inflation was high due to the debasement of Roman coins, Palmyra remained relatively unaffected. That is, until Zenobia became queen.

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<sup>74</sup> Veyne, "Palmyra", 14.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid 15.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid

<sup>77</sup> Raja, "*Pearl of the Desert*," 10.

# INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

## Persia: the Sasanian Dynasty

To the east of Palmyra resides the Persian Empire, which encompasses the entirety of modern-day Iran and is expanded shallowly into the east and west, from Indus River to the northern Tigris and Euphrates river valleys. The Sasanian Dynasty was established in 224 CE when the Persian king Ardashir defeated the Parthian ruler Artabanus V, effectively ending the Parthian Empire. In 241, Ardashir's son and heir Shapur ascended the throne and vowed to expand the empire, to regain the once lands conquered by the old Persian emperors Darius and Xerxes.

While the neighboring Parthians had co-existed amicably with Palmyra, the growing power of the Sasanians and rising ambitions of Shapur have proved to be a serious threat to Palmyra's economic prosperity and domestic peace. Soon after his ascent to power, Shapur identified the Roman Empire as his main opponent and roadblock to territorial domination and expansion into the west. Thus, early in his reign, Shapur campaigned against the Romans and in 252/3 he successfully plundered Antioch, a Roman city near the Silk Road in modern-day Türkiye.<sup>78</sup> Recognizing Shapur's military success, or perhaps wary of his ambition, Odenathus sent various gifts and letters to the Sasanian king, which were immediately rejected on the basis of Palmyra's allyship with the Roman Empire.<sup>79</sup>

Shapur continued his campaigns into the west, overtaking territory along the Euphrates river. In response to Shapur's hostility and continued threats of expansion, Odenathus aligned fully with the Roman Empire. In 260, Odenathus finally took active measures when Shapur captured the Roman emperor Valerian in

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<sup>78</sup> Smith, "Roman Palmyra", 175.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid 175-6.

Mesopotamia by successfully campaigning against the Sasanians, though failing to retrieve the emperor. Odenathus campaigned again for the Roman Empire in 262, recovering most of the territory in Mesopotamia from Shapur. Most recently, in 266, Odenathus advanced further into Sasanian territory as an attempt to conquer the capital Ctesiphon.<sup>80</sup>

Despite the recent land recoveries and the rise of Palmyrene power over eastern Roman provinces, the Sasanians remain economically uncooperative and territorially hostile. Most affected by this hostility is the caravan trade that Palmyra relies on for economic growth and stability. Prior to the Sasanian Dynasty, Palmyrene settlement communities lived peacefully throughout the Parthian Empire. By 258, Shapur had destroyed these widely diverse and commercial communities.<sup>81</sup> In the face of an ongoing conflict, which threatens the political and economic stability in the Near East, the Palmyrene Empire must consider strategic allyship, trade negotiation, and, if necessary, military action.

## Roman Egypt

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The annexation of Egypt into the Roman Empire occurred at the end of the 1st century BCE with the defeat of Marc Antony and Cleopatra by the Roman emperor Augustus. Soon after, the Ptolemaic monarchy was dismantled and short-term governors to effectively remove the large-scale political influence of Egypt. However, despite the depoliticized state, the province continues to be a center for international trade, fine arts, and education.

For most of their shared history, Egypt and Palmyra were neutral towards each other. Palmyrene merchants were welcome to work at Egyptian trade ports. Egypt, a prosperous province of the Roman Empire,

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid 177.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid 176.

was incredibly wealthy compared with its neighbors. Due to the Persian wars wreaking havoc on the Euphrates trade routes, Palmyra turned to Egypt as a flourishing trade center, as it controlled the Red Sea ports, through which commercial goods flow and is central to the food supply for the Roman Empire.<sup>82</sup> Furthermore, there is a growing desire among Palmyrene merchants to assume tighter control over the threatened markets and commerce.<sup>83</sup> With the current economic and territorial crises spawned by the Sasanian Dynasty, the Palmyrene Empire must quickly decide how to approach the Roman Empire's most economically thriving yet politically weak province.

## The Gallic Roman Empire

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The Gallic Roman Empire, also known as simply the Gallic Empire, is a breakaway state from the Roman Empire, currently governing the territories of Britain, Spain, and Gaul, which is the land encompassing modern day Belgium, France, Luxembourg, Northern Italy, Germany, the Netherlands, and areas of Switzerland.

When the Sasanian king Shapur successfully campaigned in the eastern territories of the Roman Empire and captured Emperor Valerian in 253, the empire fell into a state of confusion over central political and military power. Amidst the scramble, two figureheads rose to defend the empire, Valerian's son Gallienus and a German-born Roman governor Postumus. Gallienus focused on the Italian fronts, ignoring the frontiers encompassing most of western Europe. In his stead, Postumus, as the general of the legions of Gaul, protected the western province from attacks. As a result, the Gallic population identified Postumus as their rightful leader instead of Gallienus. In 260, after Postumus' assassination of Gallienus' son and heir, his title of emperor over the Gaul and

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<sup>82</sup> Smith, "Roman Palmyra," 178.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

the establishment of the Gallic Roman Empire was solidified.<sup>84</sup> However, besides Postumus' campaign across the Rhine river in 262-3 and his several deflections against Gallienus' reclamations of power, the Gallic Empire has maintained a well-ordered administration and a powerful military frontier.

While the Gallic Empire represents an apparent physical separation from the Roman Empire, the citizens within the Gallic Empire, as well as Postumus himself, consider themselves to be Roman. Postumus coordinated the creation of aqueducts and amphitheaters, and even titled himself as the Roman Emperor.<sup>85</sup> Because of this, the Roman Empire views the Gallic Empire to be a legitimate threat to the central powers and authority of the "true" empire. Despite the geographical distance, the Palmyrene Empire, as a Roman province, must consider the Gallic Empire as a critical military force and potential political destabilizer.

## Social Structure

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Due to its foundations in and reliance on caravan trade, Palmyrene society was structured around promoting further trade and rewarding the merchants who made that trade possible. Outside of fostering Palmyra's economic development, these merchants and notables were also praised for their private donations and contributions to the infrastructure and culture of the city and surrounding rural hinterlands.<sup>86</sup>

## Class Identities

The population of Palmyrenes can be divided into three classes of people: urban dwellers living in the city, pastoralists and farmers in the villages and surrounding rural land, and those nomads and merchants who

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<sup>84</sup>Bileta, Vedran. "What Was the Gallic Empire?" The Collector, May 29, 2023. <https://www.thecollector.com/what-was-the-gallic-empire/>.

<sup>85</sup>Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Gaul." Encyclopedia Britannica, August 12, 2024. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Gaul-ancient-region-Europe>.

<sup>86</sup>Smith, "Community: Continuity and Change."



conduct trade in and out of the city.<sup>87</sup> This is a simplified trichotomy of the Palmyrene identity, as there was an interdependency between the work of all such groups, and thus there was social and economic integration amongst them.<sup>88</sup>

However, the urban centers and countryside of Palmyra can be distinguished by their predominant culture. Whereas country land remained largely tribal— both in possession and in their traditions— the cities were focal points of diversity, as it was a hub of cultural and commercial exchange.<sup>89</sup>

## Role of Women

Compared to other civilizations of the time, including the Roman empire, Palmyrene women enjoyed a great degree of economic freedom and independence. Although women maintained these economic rights, as well as rights to remarry and act as a legal guardian to a child, there were still limitations on the role of women in public life. Similar to other familial structures of Mediterranean communities, Palmyrene families were patriarchal, with men being the head of the household and women and children being bound to the family by obligation.<sup>90</sup> Such familial structure goes back to Palmyra's tribal emphasis on kinship.

## Military Situation

Palmyra's status as a major trade center oriented their military force with the safety of traders as a top priority.<sup>91</sup> Being situated in the Syrian Desert, the major threat to Palmyrene trade was banditry from the nomadic tribes surrounding the region. Because of both Palmyrene interests in protecting trade and Roman interests in

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<sup>87</sup>Holcomb, "Palmyra's ephemeral."

<sup>88</sup> Roman Palmyra, Andrew Smith, 104.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid

<sup>90</sup> Ibid 87.

<sup>91</sup>Holcomb, "Palmyra's ephemeral" 43.

maintaining its strategic position in the East,<sup>92</sup> Palmyra was given permission to patrol the Syrian desert independent of the Roman military, utilizing both government-led and private forces.

Despite being a colony of the Roman Empire, Palmyra as a city amassed a largely independent military force.<sup>93</sup> At the time of Empress Zenobia's rise to power, the size of the army was somewhere in a range of 30,000 to 70,000 soldiers. Because of the scarce documentation and conflicting sources, this exact number is unclear. Aside from its impressive size, the Palmyrene army touted a highly renowned archery unit. The native army was composed primarily of "Palmyrenes, Syrians, and barbarians," reflecting the ethnic diversity in the region.

The Palmyrene army's formidable size and reputation was a result of Odenathus' efforts to build a native army as well as compile scattered Roman forces under his command. In reward for his loyalty to the Roman emperor, Odenathus was granted the title of commander over the Roman East.<sup>94</sup> His title highlights Odenathus' hypothetical authority over Roman forces, as well as the trust Romans had in a Palmyrene army to secure their Eastern borders. Indeed, the independent army Odenathus amassed not only proved useful to the Romans, but the army's capabilities to travel long distances from Palmyra for long periods of time would also be critical for the Palmyrene Empire.<sup>95</sup>

## Neoplatonism: the Revival of Hellenic Intellectualism and Philosophy

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Throughout antiquity, scholars have been dedicated to Classical Greek philosophy, none more so than the student of Socrates and teacher of Aristotle, Plato. Platonism continued in various locations throughout the Roman Empire, especially, however, in philosophical schools of Rome and Alexandria. In the early 3rd century,

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid 12.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid 13-14

a reinterpretation of Platonism, or rather a collection of Platonic ideas, started the Neoplatonist movement. Although the philosopher Plotinus has been considered the founder, Neoplatonism found its way through various schools from multiple cities in the Roman Empire.

“Neoplatonism”<sup>96</sup> is modern terminology for the Platonist philosophical movement in late antiquity, which accumulated various philosophical teachings as well as Plato’s. The “Neoplatonists” in 3rd century CE, however, recognized themselves as Platonists and did uphold Plato’s philosophy, believing it to be the most legitimate doctrine of any ancient philosopher.<sup>97</sup> The main teachings of Neoplatonists centered around Plato’s concept of the three levels of ideal reality, the reality one is able to perceive, the third level essentially unreachable even to those well-versed in philosophy. This concept prioritizes understanding Plato’s teachings, as well as other subjects such as astronomy and mathematics, in order to elevate one’s mind to the next level. In general, the central teachings of Neoplatonism aided in the understanding of an individual within the larger universe and the complex universe itself.

Since 262, Emperor Gallienus has supported the intellectual community of the Roman Empire, allowing philosophers to thrive in Roman cities.<sup>98</sup> To a lesser degree, Neoplatonism has begun to find a home with Palmyrene intellectual and philosophical communities. As the most widespread philosophical ideology in the empire, with the aid of the Palmyrene Empire, Palmyrene scholars have an opportunity to expand and utilize the Neoplatonist movement as it places a particular emphasis on prioritizing academic scholarship and spiritual understanding.

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<sup>96</sup> To be clear, Platonism can be used as an alternate term for Neoplatonism in committee.

<sup>97</sup> Christian Wildberg. “Neoplatonism.” In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Edited by Edward N. Zalta. October 23, 2021. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2021/entries/neoplatonism/>.

<sup>98</sup> Britannica, “Valerian.”

## CHARACTER BIOS

### Cassius Longinus (Chief Counselor)

Born in Emesa—contemporarily known as Homs, Syria—Cassius Longinus is a Greek rhetorician and Platonist philosopher who serves as Chief Counselor to Zenobia. From his childhood, Longinus would travel abroad and become acquainted with many well-respected philosophers. During this time, he was also a pupil of Ammonius Saccas and Origen the Pagan. After this period, Longinus traveled to Athens where he instructed his own pupils in philosophy, criticism, and rhetoric. He is known for his great extent of knowledge, being nicknamed a “walking museum,” and for his impeccable critical and judgmental skills. Longinus later returned to Emesa where he taught Zenobia in Greek literature and became one of Zenobia’s trusted confidants and advisors.

### Fronto of Emesa (Rhetorician)

Fronto of Emesa is a Greek rhetorician and teacher, one of Zenobia’s intellectual cohorts within her court. Unlike many scholars, Fronto came from humble origins, he was the youngest of his siblings, with his father a traveling merchant while his mother weaved rugs. Nevertheless, his parents ensured that he received a quality education, using every expense to afford tutors. Fronto spent most of his formative years studying geometry and Greek literature, and, when he was sixteen, he traveled to Alexandria to study under the most prominent rhetoricians. Soon after, he took upon a position as an educator, traveling from Alexandria to Athens, back to his hometown to ensure his young nephew Cassius Longinus a quality education. While Fronto primarily teaches in Athens, Zenobia, who admired dedication to education and learning, invited him to join her court to support the intellectual community of the Palmyrene Empire.

## Theodorus of Asine (Philosopher)

Native to Asine in Laconia, Theodorus is a Neoplatonist<sup>99</sup> philosopher who was initially a disciple of Iamblichus and Porphyry. Theodorus' works in philosophy would be important for the further development of Neoplatonism and Christian mysticism, specifically in his conception of 'The One': a divine triad that represented life, creation, and the cosmos. His philosophy also touched on more social matters, suggesting that both men and women possess the same virtues. Although equality of the sexes has been argued before in other schools of philosophy, he was one of the few Neoplatonists who did so. He argued that it is impossible to suggest women possess no virtue, as this would mean any society is already maimed. He goes further in saying women cannot possess one but not the other, as the virtues are intertwined and reciprocal in nature, meaning men and women are equal in virtue. Theodorus was already familiar with Zenobia as he maintained a friendship with Iamblichus— who lived in Syria at the time— and was eager to not only support Palmyrene independence, but also to forward his philosophy.

## Apollonius of Tyana (Philosopher)

Apollonius was born in Tyana, Cappadocia in Roman Anatolia into a wealthy and aristocratic Greek family. Known as a wandering philosopher, Apollonius spent most of his time teaching throughout the Middle East and North Africa. He was an important player in reviving Pythagorean doctrines, centralizing Pythagoras in the Greek philosophical tradition. Apollonius was heavily aligned with the Pythagorean philosophical tradition and lifestyle, living frugally and being opposed to animal sacrifice. He also believed that God could not be influenced by any sacrifice or prayer from humans, and that God did not wish to be worshiped at all. Instead, Apollonius emphasized the spirituality of intellect and reason (nous). There are also accounts from the time that

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<sup>99</sup> See "Neoplatonism: ..." in "Current Situation" for more on terminology and philosophical beliefs.

indicate Apollonius' sixth sense or extra-sensory perception that allowed him to carry out certain miracles, which made him a popular figure among pagans in the Roman Empire.

## **Cleopatra the Alchemist (Alchemist & Philosopher)**

Cleopatra was raised in Oxyrhynchus, Egypt but eventually traveled to Alexandria to solidify her career in scholarship. While she worked in the libraries copying and studying texts, she began to formulate her own research, particularly in alchemy and applied mathematics. Although Cleopatra is not her birth name, she uses it both as a pseudonym for her academic work and as a self-inserted placeholder in her alchemy dialogues. Like Plato, she prefers articulating her natural philosophy through dialogue, in which she already has written a few, describing her alchemy work and measuring techniques. Not only is Cleopatra becoming quickly known as one of the greatest practical alchemists of her time, but she is also well-versed in Platonian and Pythagorean philosophies. Cleopatra's career has only begun, yet the circulation of her texts has captured the attention of Zenobia, hoping that her words will help guide the Palmyrene Empire's intellectual movement.

## **Claudia Livia (Biographer)**

Claudia Livia was raised as the youngest of eight children in Athens. Her father, grandfather, and all seven older brothers are politicians, holding local seats in Athens and abroad in Italia. Despite her family history, Claudia was never interested in politics and figureheads in the same way her brothers and father were. When she turned sixteen, she left home to travel to Southern Italia and then to Egypt. During her travels, she studied under several philosophers and scholars, learning rhetoric, Platonic philosophy, and theology. Under the support of one of her teachers, Claudia began to write about her travels and studies. Her talent at writing caught the eyes of many politicians and religious figureheads during her travels, and commissioned biographies from her. While finishing a commission in Alexandria, Claudia learned of a powerful Syrian queen in the Palmyrene province. Inspired, Claudia moved to Palmyra and quickly caught the attention of Zenobia. Like the Roman politicians, Zenobia

understands how important a legacy is, and she entrusts Claudia, as her biographer, with the ability to announce her presence to her contemporaries and keep her legacy alive for centuries to come.

## **Iamblichus (Philosopher)**

Iamblichus to an aristocratic Syrian family, the Sampsigeramids of Emesa, in Chalcis ad Belum, modern-day northern Syria. In his childhood, Iamblichus studied grammar, geometry, and poetry under private tutors. At age 20, under his own ambition, Iamblichus traveled to Alexandria to study under the bishop and philosopher Anatolius, then to Rome to study under the Platonist Porphyry of Tyre, the head of the philosophical circle and the editor of the great founder Plotinus' works. During his study in Rome, Iamblichus developed his own philosophies based on a pessimistic perspective of the human soul, a clear contradiction of Plotinus' Platonic interpretation. Soon after that, he moved back to Syria with plans to establish his own Platonic ideas. His main philosophical interests lie in Pythagoreanism and Platonism and believes strongly in the right to participate in Paganism as a religious practice. Moreover, he is one of the first to be considered a Neoplatonist.<sup>100</sup> Iamblichus feels that Zenobia's personal preferences of philosophy and intellectualism will be a good opportunity to build himself as a well-established Platonic philosopher in Syria.

## **Iris of Alexandria (Mathematician/Architect)**

Iris was born in the heart of Alexandria, as the only daughter to a widower architect. Since she could walk, her only dream was to follow in the footsteps of her father. At the age of ten, she had already gained the skills of an architect student twice her age, owing it to her unnaturally advanced understanding of proportion theory and geometry. When her geometry tutor recognized her mathematical capabilities, he began taking her to lectures taught by the greatest mathematicians in Alexandria. Inspired by the most advanced mathematical

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<sup>100</sup> See the "Neoplatonism" section in "Current Events"

knowledge of the 3rd century, Iris began to devote her time and studies to mathematics entirely. By twenty-five, Iris had written a compilation of mathematical lecture notes and architectural manuals designed by her advancements of proportion theory. Both as an architect and mathematician, Zenobia has recruited Iris to assist in the envisioning and development of the Palmyrene Empire, hoping to create an empire that rivals the architectural and intellectual glory of the Roman Empire.

### **Mary the Physician (Physician)**

Mary was born in a small village outside of Rome As the oldest child, she grew up caring for her younger siblings, developing natural concoctions to cure her brothers and sisters from sickness and learning to treat wounds of all kinds. Because of this, she became recognized as the village physician, known for her compassionate nature and almost encyclopedic knowledge of remedies and diseases. After an encounter with a sickly traveler passing through her village, Mary grew to believe that it was her sacred duty to travel throughout the Roman Empire, caring for fellow voyagers. Her travels allowed her talents to heal souls throughout Italia and into Egypt; she quickly became known as the elusive Wandering Physician, curing souls from the most minute sickness to the deadliest of plagues. Recognizing Mary's far-reaching kindness and medical abilities, Zenobia hired her as the Court Physician, tasked with not only developing treatments for cabinet members, but standing as the voice of healthcare within the Palmyrene Empire.

### **Septemius Zabdas (General)**

While his counterpart Zabbai hailed from Palmyrene nobility, Zabdas was born in the city of Tyre where his family were harbormasters over some of the city's southern ports. Prior to enlisting in the army, he often managed his family's business and traveled with merchants to Egypt and Anatolia. Zabdas was one of the many Syrian peasants that was recruited by Odaenathus prior to his campaign to the north following the Battle of Edessa. As a soldier, Zabdas rose through the ranks and attracted the attention of Odaenathus for his



resourcefulness and leadership among his peers. Following the defeat of the Sassanians in the north, Zabdas returned to Palmyra where he became a loyal friend to Zenobia.

### **Septimius Zabbai (General)**

Zabbai was born in Palmyra to a large family, the middle child of several younger and older siblings. His father was a Roman citizen and military general, often away from home to command troops in the east of Palmyra. As a distant relative of Zenobia, Zabbai was well acquainted with Palmyrene nobility from an early age and dreamed to one day achieve political influence and valor. Zabbai first entered the Palmyrene army through enlisting in the *clibanarii*, or armored horse cavalry. In addition to his role in the cavalry, he also assisted Odaenathus with military strategy and using his connections to the nobility and merchant classes to equip the army with additional weaponry and resources. Zabbai followed Odaenathus into his northern campaign, where he met his close confidant Zabdas. General Zabbai, alongside Zabdas and Umatis, stand as the second-in-command for the Palmyrene army.

### **Septimius Umatis (General)**

Umatis was the daughter of Vologases VI— one of the last kings of the Parthian Empire prior to being driven out of Mesopotamia by the Sassanians in the early third century C.E — and took refuge with her father in the city of Palmyra. Umatis continued practicing Zoroastrianism while in Palmyra, forming a small community of fellow practitioners in the city. With the endorsement of her father, she also received military training alongside the Odaenathus, initially having high hopes for driving out the Sassanids and restoring Parthian rule. However, when the Mesopotamian territory was returned to Rome after Odaenathus' campaign, Umatis devoted herself more to the early talks of a Palmyrene separatist movement. While her ambitions are rumored throughout the court, Umatis is still respected as a military general loyal to the Palmyrene leaders.

## **Noarai Zebida (Chief of Market)**

Prior to his present role as Chief of the Market under Zenobia, Zebida was a prominent aristocrat, native to Palmyra, that invested heavily in facilitating caravan trade, drawing on his familial resources to finance and protect caravans. Through this work, Zebida was able to establish connections with many Palmyrene, Roman, and Babylonian merchants. These merchants travel from far west in the Roman Empire to as far east as the Indian Ocean provided Zebida with valuable insight into external trading which would prove useful to advising Zenobia on further expanding Palmyrene's long distance trade.

## **Amatbel of Komare (Treasurer, Komare Tribe Representative)**

A representative of the Komare tribe, Amatbel serves as one of four of Zenobia's trusted civic treasurers. She was born in Dura-Europos and relocated to the Eastern countryside of Palmyra prior to the Sassanians laying siege on her hometown. Amatbel was a merchant who led caravans from Palmyra to Babylon and participated in trading along the Silk-Road— more so when she resided in Dura-Europos— specializing in the linen and cloth business. As a representative of Komare, she hopes to promote her tribe's involvement in caravan trading, especially in the east.

## **Hairan Aitibel (Treasurer, Mattabol Tribe Representative)**

Hairan was born on a wheat farm in the western rural hinterlands of Palmyra. From an early age, Hairan tended his family's farm and prepared salt from nearby lagoons to be sold in the city markets. He was also drawn to academia, specifically mathematics and farm sciences, and spent his teenage years studying in Alexandria before returning to his family in Palmyra. Upon his return, he continued maintaining his family business in wheat and barley farming and took lead in representing his tribe through resolving disputes between the Mattabol and the Ma'zin over water usage. Intrigued by his involvement in public tribal affairs and his expertise in agriculture,

Hairan was approached by Zenobia to represent the Mattabol as a civic treasurer. In his new role, Hairan hopes to prioritize Mattabol interests in bolstering irrigation to farmland and improving the overall quality of life of those in the rural hinterlands of Palmyra.

### **Mattanai Iii of Ma'zin (Treasurer, Ma'zin Tribe Representative)**

Mattanai represents the Ma'zin tribe as a treasurer, and hopes to leverage their position to support the Ma'zin commercial and pastoral endeavors, as well as supporting Ma'zin tribe nomadic tribe families. Mattanai was born and raised in the outskirts of Palmyra in a large family of goat herders, and would often travel into the city and nearby caravans to deal livestock products. A true businessman, Mattanai always dreamed of expanding his family's business across the Mediterranean, and was intrigued at the prospects of a Palmyrene separatist movement and creating an empire that rivaled the reach of the Romans. Although just pastoralists in the Palmyrene countryside, Mattanai and his family also invested in the construction of temples in Palmyra— most notably the Temple of Al-lat— which earned his name honors and recognition among city leaders.

### **Salmat (Treasurer, Mita Tribe Representative)**

Raised in the city center of Palmyra, Salmat was a part of a wealthy Mita family which had spent generations building upon a trade network in gemstones and metals. She spent much of her early years abroad, as her father was a prominent gemstone merchant that dealt heavily with Indian markets. She received her education at the higher-learning institution of Pushpagiri in the Odisha region of India, studying mathematics and accounting in hopes of taking the lead of her family's business. Salmat returned to Palmyra and made relations with many socialite circles in the city as a means of selling jewels, while also managing the books of the larger business. When Sassanians and challenges to the Roman imperial throne brought instability to nearby territories, Salmat was tapped by Odaenathus' court to act as an economic advisor to his military campaigns. She continues to serve in the Palmyrene court, serving as the Mita tribe representative treasurer.

## **Firmus (Economic Advisor)**

A salesman from Seleukeia, Firmus acquired extensive trade connections in Arabia, Egypt, and as far as India. His business in grain, linens, and papyrus allowed him to acquire a large amount of wealth and reputation among merchants in the areas he traded. He conducted most of his operations from Alexandria, and was very involved in public life and intellectual circles. Taking from his personal funds, Firmus was a proud supporter and investor in the Great Library of Alexandria at a time when membership and funding in the library was fastly dwindling. Often crossing through Palmyra, Firmus became well acquainted with Zenobia, and was a trusted advisor to her for the international markets and specifically Egyptian trade interests.

## **Septimius Worod (Viceroy of Odenathus/Political Advisor)**

A Palmyrene noble of Persian descent, Worod— whose Hellenized name is Vorodes— was one of the highest commanding civil and military officers in Palmyra next to Odenathus himself. Originally named Aurelius Worod, he adopted the name Septimius as an indicator to his loyalty towards Odenathus. His roles in Palmyra included an administrator of justice and public notary as well as taking charge of civil affairs. Prior to his position as deputy to Odenathus, he was a civil official— procurator ducenarius— and military commander for Rome. When Odenathus is away from Palmyra, Worod would govern the state in his absence. Zenobia is cautious of Worod's personal ambitions, but trusts that he will have the best interests of the leadership of her and her husband as well as the Palmyrene Empire in mind.

## **Virius Lupus (Representative of the Persian Empire)**

Virius Lupus was already well acquainted with Roman politics from his upbringing, as his father Lucius Virius Lupus Lulianus was a Roman military official in the earlier half of the 3rd century C.E. Virius Lupus was appointed the senatorial Praeses, or governor, of Rome's Arabian province under the reign of Emperor Gallienus.

This role put Lupus near Odaenathus in Palmyra, which is where their political friendship began to form. In the 260s, his position shifted multiple times leading up to Zenobia's rise to power: he came to the governorship of Syria Coele, being under the direct authority of Odaenathus himself. However, due to heightened instability in the Asia Roman province— including western Anatolia— with Gothic invasions and epidemic disease, Lupus was then appointed governor of Asia. Owing much of his political power and credibility to both Odaenathus and Rome, Lupus was torn between loyalty to the Palmyrene secessionist movement and the Roman Empire. Ultimately, he offered his political advising to Zenobia.

### **Statilius Ammianus (Representative of Roman Italy)**

Statilius Ammianus was a part of a long line of descendants of the gens Statilia— a plebeian family from the Lucanian tribe in Southern Italy. Many members of gens Statilia went on to occupy major offices throughout the Roman Republic and eventually the Roman Empire. Ammianus was no exception, as he was appointed prefect of Roman Italy. Prior to this role, he commanded an ala, or Roman cavalry unit, in Arabia under Emperor Valerian's rule. Under Gallienus' rule, he served as deputy prefect in the Arabian province. Being stationed in Levant in civil and military capacities put Ammianus in close relation with Odaenathus, who was then known as 'King of kings' in Palmyra.

### **Salman Seleukos (Governor of Mesopotamia)**

Seleukos was a Palmyrene citizen appointed by Odaenathus as the governor of Mesopotamia following the defeat of Shapur I. Once the Mesopotamian territory was retaken for Rome, Odaenathus ensured whoever would be appointed would be loyal to Palmyrene interests by taking it upon himself to make that appointment. A member of the Palmyrene *clibanarii* alongside Septimius Zabdas, Seleukos was already well studied in Sasanian military tactics and armaments, which made him an attractive candidate to govern such a precarious territory as Mesopotamia. Seleukos and his family were also well-known in Palmyra for their patronage to rebuilding

infrastructure ravaged by military skirmishes in Palmyra's outskirt territories. However, in his new position, Seleukos faces the dilemma of balancing Palmyrene interests while also preserving the interests and culture of his new constituents.

## **Timagenes (Representative of Roman Egypt)**

A native of Egypt, Timagenes was brought up in a well-connected Greek family in Alexandria. The Egyptian city of Alexandria hosted multiple Greek settlements rich in Greek and Hellenistic culture, and prominent figures in these settlements boasted veteran statuses and high-profile military backgrounds. While Romans made little distinction between Egyptian-Greeks and Egyptians, Timagenes was still attached with his Greek identity, and admired Palmyra for its embrace of Greek and Hellenistic culture. Leveraging his military expertise and connections, Timagenes became a trusted general in Roman Egypt. However, with the Roman military's instability and infighting, Timagenes privately turned his loyalty to his hometown of Alexandria, which was already suffering from plague and famine.

## **Pamphilus of Caesarea (Priest)**

Pamphilus was born to a wealthy family in Beirut of the Phoenicia territory. He went on to study at the Catechetical School of Alexandria, which was the first higher institution for Christian theology. He became an avid and well-regarded theologian, being ordained as a priest in Caesarea and made head of the catechetical school in the area. Pamphilus was well known by students and in the Christian community for his devotion to pedagogy and the size and brilliance of his library collection of sacred literature. He was specifically drawn to the works of Origen the Pagan, a contemporary controversial figure in theology. With his student and friend Eusebius of Caesarea, Pamphilus wrote long works in defense of Origen and continued studying and translating manuscripts. Pamphilus is also known for his ascetic and charitable lifestyle through his forfeiture of all property and wealth

to the poor. Because of his charitable reputation and commitment to the study and development of theology, Zenobia has recruited Pampilus as an advisor for the intellectual movement she hopes to bring to the empire.

### **Paul of Samosata (Bishop)**

Born in Samosata— located in the southern region of modern day Turkey— Paul was of humble upbringing. A prominent figure in Christian spheres, he was elected Bishop of Antioch in 260 C.E., although he came to hold very unorthodox views to mainstream Christianity. Paul rejected the idea of the Trinity, and instead adopted Monarchianism. He taught Monarchianism using his position and paying others to promote his teachings. Because of his doctrines and questionable practices, a council of church leaders called the Synods of Antioch gathered to depose of Paul as bishop. However, Paul leveraged his friendship and patronage with Zenobia to maintain his position, despite the council's decision. He relies on her protection as he continues to practice as a bishop in Antioch, and in return offers his services as an imperial procurator for Zenobia.

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