

West meets East: At the Borders of the *Oikoumenē* and Beyond

Lecture 17 – Palmyra and the Persian Gulf

CLAH6007

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Palmyra “The Bride of the Desert”

- Important location between Dura-Europos and the cities of the Levant.
- Occupation at the site from at least the second millennium BC.
- Important role as middlemen – presence in Rome, Seleucia-on-the-Tigris, Vologasias, Spasinou Charax, Dura-Europos, etc.



Map from Browning (1979)

- Increasing Arab migration into the town (latter half of 1st millennium BC).
- Under Seleucid domination (c.300 BC).
- Palmyra sandwiched between two “super-powers” by the mid-first century BC.

“...[41 BC] Antony sent a cavalry force to Palmyra, situated not far from the Euphrates, to plunder it, bringing the petty allegation against its inhabitants, that being on the frontier between the Romans and the Parthians, they had avoided taking sides between them; for, being merchants, they bring the products of India and Arabia from Persia and sell them in the Roman territory; but in fact, Antony's intention was to enrich his horsemen. However, the Palmyrenes were forewarned and they transported their property across the river, and, stationing themselves on the bank, prepared to shoot anybody who should attack them, for they are expert bowmen. The cavalry found nothing in the city. They turned round and came back, having met no foe, and empty-handed.” – **Appian BC 5.9.**

Tributary “Buffer State”

- Creticus Silanus (AD 13-17) lays down the territorial boundaries of the Palmyrene state.
- Statues were put up in the Temple of Bel to Germanicus, Tiberius and Drusus.
- Roman “garrison” alongside Palmyrene forces (particularly mounted archers).
- Parallel with Parthian Dura-Europos.



The Site of Palmyra

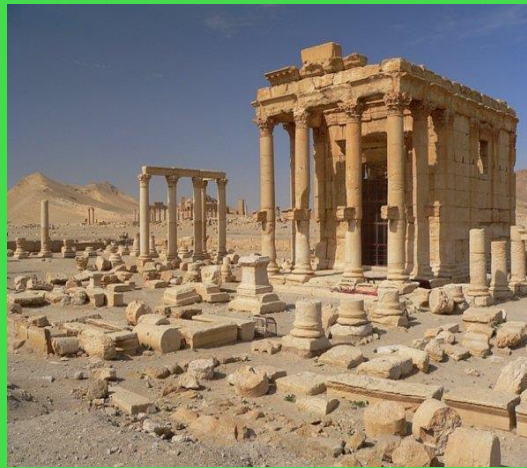
- Oasis of Tadmor and farming land to the northwest – important for agriculture, supporting livestock, and providing a perennial source of water.
- Sailing up the Euphrates and crossing at Zeugma the more logical route?
- Primary source of information from commemorative caravan inscriptions.

“Palmyra is a city famous for its location, for the richness of its soil and for its pleasant springs, and its fields are surrounded by a vast sea of sand.” – **Pliny *NH* 5.21.88.**

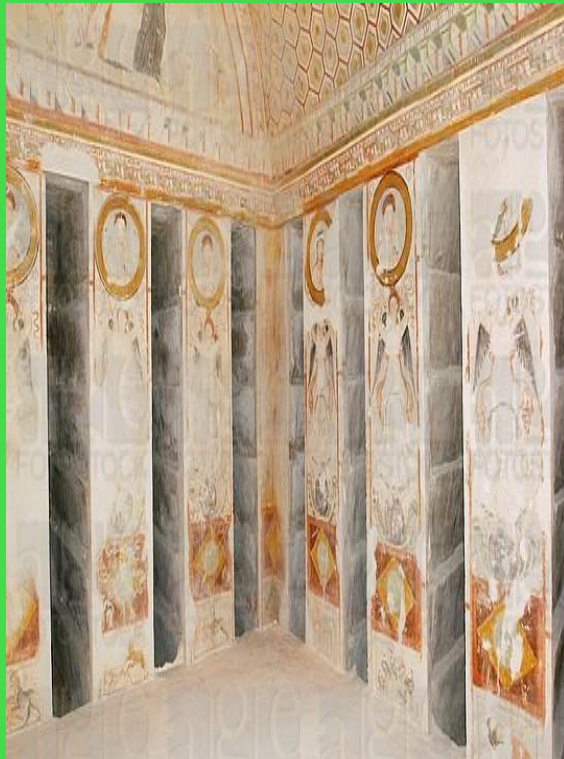
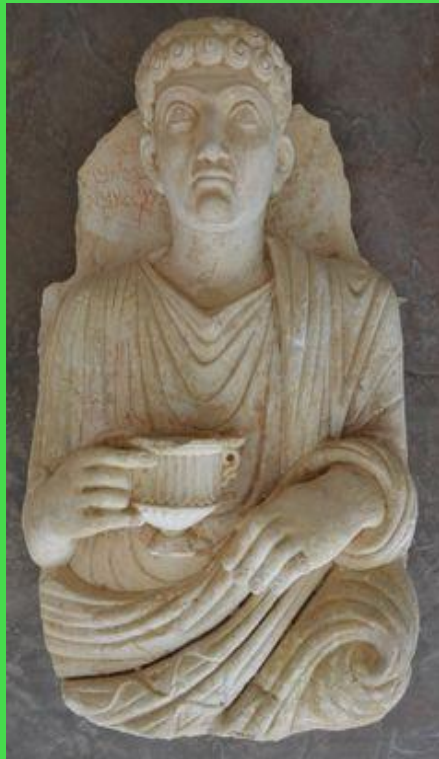


Culture in Palmyra

- Hadrian visits the city in AD 129 – *Hadriana Palmyra*.
- Greek peristyle houses of the wealthy.
- Assembly (AD 24/25), Senate (AD 74), Treasurers, Roman *curator* (AD 129).
- Religious triads – Bel, Iarhibol and Aglibol; Baal Shamin, Aglibol (again) and Malakbel.



- Abstract nature of Palmyrene art – emphasis on frontality.
- “Eternal house” – tower, funerary temple or hypogaea.
- Baths of “Diocletian” restored between AD 293 and 303.



Palmyra and the Persian Gulf Trade

Commerce in the Gulf

- Numerous bilingual, Greek and Palmyrene inscriptions – frequently mentions a *synodiarch*, and the destination.
- Caravans chiefly travelled to Spasinou Charax, the capital of the kingdom of Mesene on the Gulf - after AD 140 they also travelled to the city of Vologesias.

“To Marcus Ulpius Iarhai son of Hairan, son of Abgar, the patriot, the merchants who have returned from Scythia on the ship of Honainu son of Hassudan son of... having helped and assisted them with great willingness (dedicated this) in his honour, in the month Dystos in the year 468 (AD 157).” – Texidor *Un Port romain du désert*, 38.

Organisation of the Caravan Trade

- *Synodiarch* (or in some later inscriptions *archemporos*) – also the patrons or protectors of the caravans?

“To Marcus Ulpius Iarhai, son of Hairan Abgar, the caravan under his son Abgar which has come from Spasinou Charax (dedicated this) for helping in every way in his honour, in the year 470 in the month Artemision (AD 159)” - ***Inv. X. 107.***

“The Council and the People to Julius Aurelius Salamallat, son of Male son of Abdai, chief merchant, who brought back a caravan at his own expense, (dedicated this) in his honour, in the year 569 (AD 257/258).” – ***Inv. III. 13.***

The Palmyrene Army

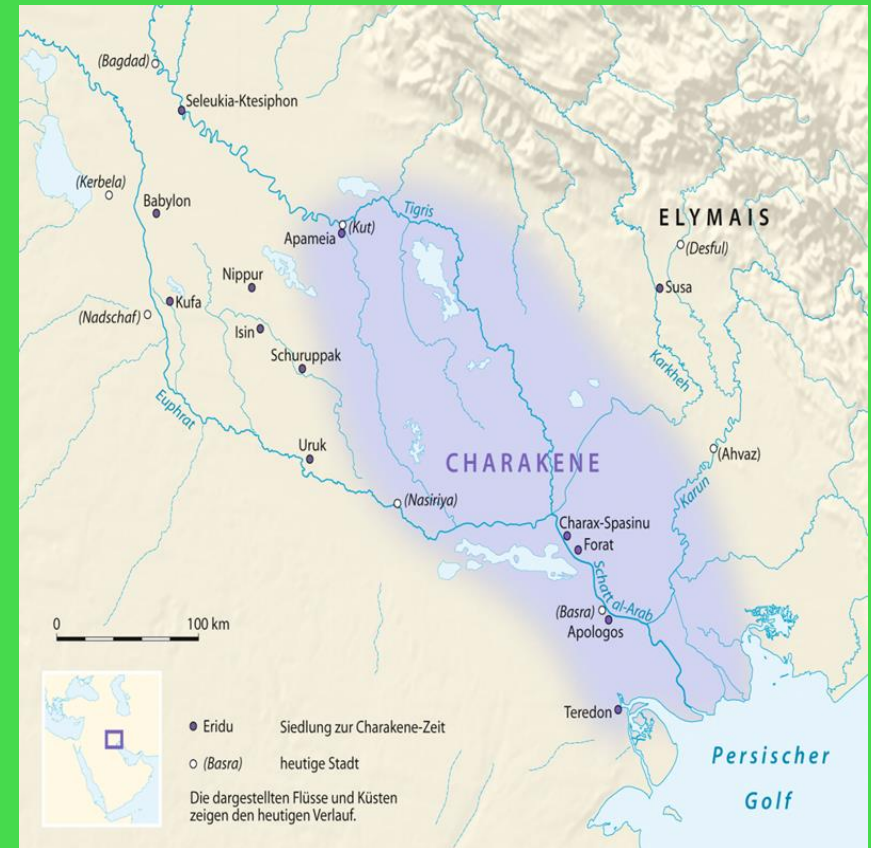
- Caravan guards, who were employed by the *synodiarch*.
- “Caravan police” or Palmyrene militia appears to have been organised and controlled by the city itself.
- Strategic garrison at ‘Ana on the Euphrates (*strategos* of ‘Ana and Gamla’), and a military presence on the island of Bijan.
- Units of archers and *dromedarii* – also used as auxiliaries by the Romans – Roman auxiliary garrison at Palmyra.

“By the decree of the Council and the People, (in honour of) Aelius Boras, son of Titus Aelius Ogeilu, *strategos* of the peace ([Palmyrene text] who established peace in the territories of the city), having been appointed by both Manilius Fuscus and Venidius Rufus, governors, and by his own country, and having displayed great enthusiasm and courage, and acting as *strategos* on many occasions.” – **SEG VII.138.**

“By the Decree of the Council and the People. The four tribes (honour) Ogeilu son of Maqqai, son of Ogeilu Hagegu, son of Sewira, for all his virtue and courage and for continually raising commands against the nomads, and for always providing safety to the merchants and the caravans in all his caravan commands.” – **Inv. X. 44 = SEG VII. 139.**

The Kingdom of Mesene (Characene)

- Was Palmyra really neutral?
- Alexandros as ambassador to the kings of Mesene and Elymais (AD 18/19).
- Inscriptions indicating satraps and archons in Mesene.
- So'adu son of Bolyada, a *dynasteia*, erect a temple of Augustus in Vologesias.

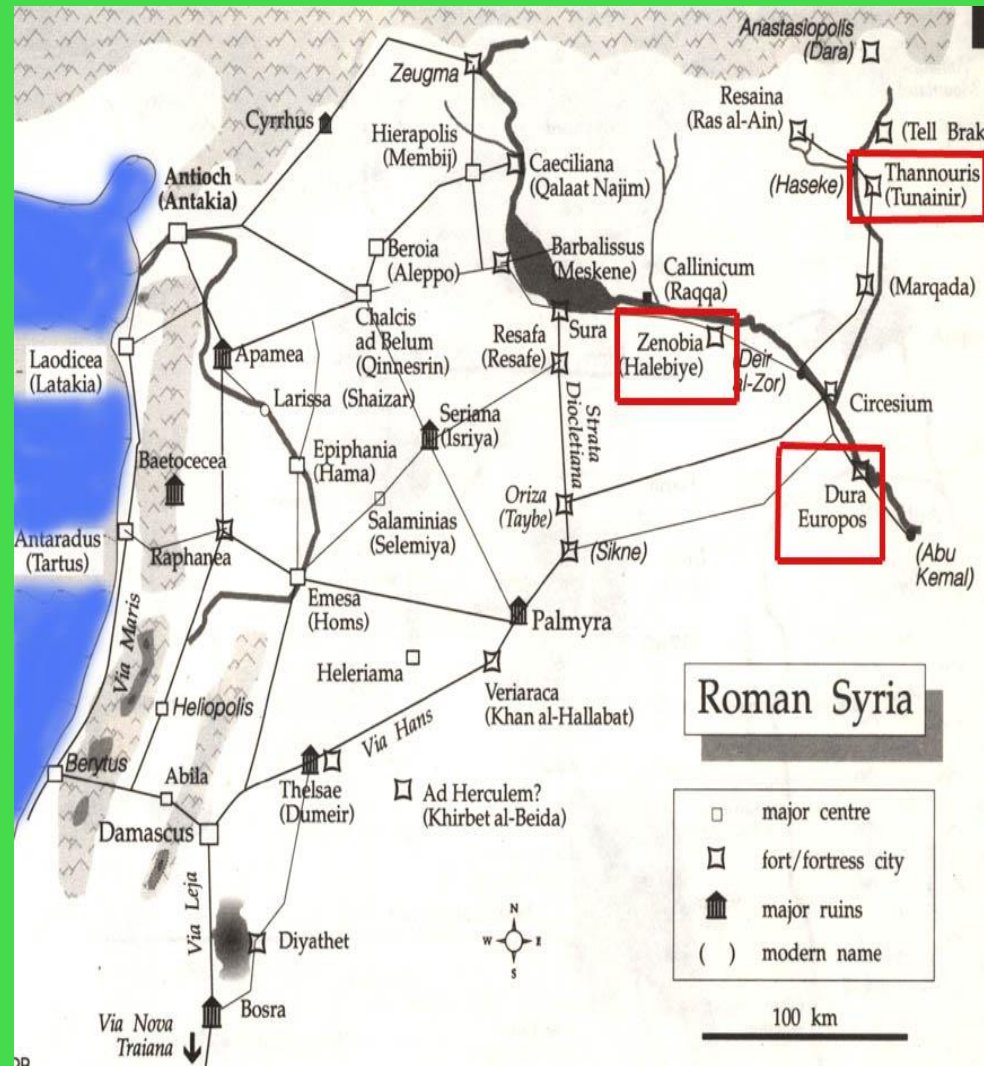


“It has its own fate between the two great empires, of the Romans and of the Parthians, and at the first discord is always the concern of both sides.” — Pliny *NH* 5.21.88.

“In the year 462 by the Greek reckoning (AD 150/151) the King of Kings Arsaces Vologeses, son of Meredates (i.e. Mithradates) the king, campaigned in Mesene against Meredates the king, the son of Pacorus, who was king before, and having pursued Meredates the king from Mesene he became ruler of all Mesene, and when this bronze statue of Herakles the god had been brought by him from Mesene, he set it up in the temple of the god Apollo with the bronze gates in front.” – F. A. Pennacchietti ‘L’Inscrizione bilingue greco-parthica dell’Eracle di Seleucia’ *Mesopotamia* 22 (1987), 169-86.

Difficulties for Palmyra?

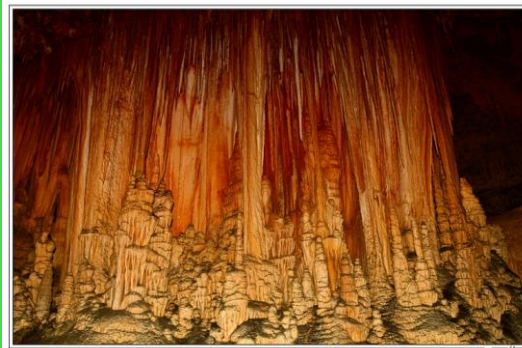
- Capture of Dura-Europos (AD 165) by Lucius Verus.
- Parthian campaigns of the Severans – disappearance of inscriptions referencing Spasinou Charax or Mesene.
- Continued building activity in Palmyra.



Palmyrenes in the Red Sea Trade

- Zabdalas, son of Salmanos, set up a propylaea, three stoa and thyromata, from his own funds at Koptos - *I. Portes* 103.
- Julius Aurelius, part of a community of merchants and *naukleroi* at Denderah (c.AD 160-212).
- Wooden tablet with Palmyrene text at Hoq on the island of Socotra.
- Inscription of auxiliary soldier Marcus Aurelius Mokimos at Berenike.

“In the mount of *tammûz* in the 25th day, of the year 569, I, Abgar... came, in the pain of my soul, here. Bless you the god who installed us/me here. (You) man who will read this tablet you will bless me/us and he will leave the tablet in its place.” - July AD 258 - Gorea 2012: 451.



Palmyra and the “Third Century Crisis”

- Problems of usurpations, invasions, break-way territories, economic problems and occasional outbreaks of plague.
- Rise of the Julii Aurelii Septimii - Lucius Septimius Odaenath (Odaenathus).
- Capture of the Emperor Valerian at Edessa in AD 260.
- Odaenathus granted title of *Restitutor totius Orientis* by Gallienus after a major victory over Shapur – he takes for himself the title King of Kings.

When Valerian was captured (for where should we begin the biography of Gallienus, if not with that calamity which, above all, brought disgrace on his life?), when the commonwealth was tottering, when Odaenathus had seized the rule of the East... Now at once he proclaimed a war on the Persians to exact for Valerian the vengeance neglected by Valerian's son. He immediately occupied Nisibis and Carrhae, the people of which surrendered, reviling Gallienus. Nevertheless, Odaenathus showed no lack of respect toward Gallienus, for he sent him the satraps he captured — though, as it seemed, merely for the purpose of insulting him and displaying his own prowess... Odaenathus, besides, besieged an army of Parthians [Sassanians] at Ctesiphon and devastated all the country round about, killing men without number... ***SHA The Two Gallieni 1, 10.2-4.***

Rise of Zenobia

- Odaenathus was murdered in AD 267.
- Wahballat (Vaballathus) succeeds him, but as minor, has his mother Bat Zabbai, (Queen Zenobia) as Regent.
- Gallienus sends army under Heraclianus against Zenobia.

“About this same time Odaenathus was treacherously slain by his cousin [Maeonius]... - **SHA The Two Gallieni 13.1.**

“For, in fact, even a foreigner, Zenobia... boasting herself to be of the family of the Cleopatras and the Ptolemies, proceeded upon the death of her husband Odaenathus to cast about her shoulders the imperial mantle; and arrayed in the robes of Dido and even assuming the diadem...” **SHA Zenobia 30.2.**



Zenobia AE Antoninianus. 271-272 AD. S ZENOBIA AVG, diademed and draped bust right on a crescent / IVNO REGINA, Juno standing facing, head left, holding patera in right hand, sceptre in left, peacock at her feet; star in left field. RIC 2.

The Palmyrene Empire

- Annexation of Syria, followed by the sacking of Bosrah.
- Seizure of Egypt in AD 269.
- Invasion in Asia Minor in AD 270.



After thus recovering Tyana, Aurelian, by means of a brief engagement near Daphne, gained possession of Antioch, having promised forgiveness to all; and thereupon, obeying, as far as is known, the injunctions of that venerated man, Apollonius, he acted with greater kindness and mercy. After this, the whole issue of the war was decided near Emesa in a mighty battle fought against Zenobia and Zaba, her ally... ***SHA Aurelian 25.1-2.***

Aurelian Restores Unity

- Wahballat initially granted the titles of his father by Aurelian.
- Zenobia proclaims her son “Augustus” (AD 271).
- General Polybius sent to reconquer Egypt while Aurelian reconquered Asia Minor.
- Zabdas, general of Zenobia, defeated at Emesa.

Zenobia, then, conquered, fled away on camels (which they call dromedaries), but while seeking to reach the Persians she was captured by the horseman sent after her, and thus she was brought into the power of Aurelian... ***SHA Aurelian***
28.3.

Aurelian Captures Palmyra

- Inner wall, cutting the city in two was hurriedly raised – “Zenobia’s Wall”.
- Zenobia attempts to flee over the Euphrates.
- Palmyra capitulates in AD 272.
- Some of the leading citizens put to death and the city is garrisoned.

“...Aurelian, however, deeming it improper that a woman should be put to death, killed many who had advised her to begin and prepare and wage the war, but the woman he saved for his triumph, wishing to show her to the eyes of the Roman people. It was regarded as a cruel thing that Longinus the philosopher should have been among those who were killed. He, it is said, he was employed by Zenobia as her teacher in Greek letters...” – **SHA Aurelian 30.2-3.**

The Destruction of Palmyra

- City rises up a month after Aurelian's departure (AD 273) and kills garrison.
 - Aurelian returns and enters city unopposed – a massacre ensues.
 - Physical destruction seems to have been limited – though decline apparent.
- “It is a rare thing, or rather, a difficult thing, for the Syrians to keep faith. For the Palmyrenes, who had once been defeated and crushed, now that Aurelian was busied with matters in Europe, began a rebellion of no small size... But Aurelian, indeed, prepared as he always was, came back from Rhodope and, because it deserved it, destroyed the city... "From Aurelian Augustus to Cerronius Bassus. The swords of the soldiers should not proceed further. Already enough Palmyrenes have been killed and slaughtered. We have not spared the women, we have slain the children, we have butchered the old men, we have destroyed the peasants..." - **SHA Aurelian 31.1.**

Palmyra in Late Times

- Military camp built by Diocletian.
- Bishop of Palmyra, Marinos, participated in the Council of Nicaea (AD 325).
- Some building work, Colonnade Street and two basilicas.
- Early in the fifth century the Temples of Bel and Baal Shamin were turned into churches.
- Renovations under Justinian.



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