A WORTHY WARRIOR QUEEN:
PERCEPTIONS OF ZENOBIA IN ANCIENT ROME

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By

Gayle Young, B.A.

Georgetown University
Washington, D.C.
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Gayle Young, B.A.

Mentor: Dr. Charles Mc Nelis, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

Ancient Rome had a longstanding history of conflict with Eastern queens beginning, before its very foundation, with Dido and most famously exemplified by Cleopatra. Literature suggests powerful women from the East were particularly feared and loathed. Yet the Palmyrene ruler Zenobia, who claimed descent from Cleopatra and briefly conquered Egypt, was reportedly admired and, once vanquished by Aurelian, was allowed to retire comfortably to a villa in Tivoli. By examining surviving historical texts of the 3rd century, and comparing them with surviving historical and literary texts from the Augustan age, this thesis will postulate why the Roman perception of Zenobia appears to have differed so radically. It will conclude that Aurelian, who was markedly sensitive to his public image, waged a propaganda campaign that emulated that of Augustus in some respects, but ultimately differed because he needed for Zenobia to be admired in order to justify his victory over a woman.
CONTENTS

ABSTRACT ........................................................................................................... ii
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS .............................................................................. iv
INTRODUCTION ............................................................................................... 1
CHAPTER I. A BRIEF HISTORY OF ZENOBAI ............................................. 4
CHAPTER II. QUEENLY REPUTATIONS .................................................... 21
CHAPTER III. THE AMAZONIAN TRADITION .......................................... 37
CHAPTER IV. POLITICAL REALITIES OF THE EMPIRE ...................... 62
CONCLUSION .................................................................................................. 86
NOTES ............................................................................................................. 89
BIBLIOGRAPHY .............................................................................................. 94
ILLUSTRATIONS

Figures

1. Zenobia coin, 271-272 A.D. ....................................................... 26
2. Cleopatra coin, 51-30 B.C. ....................................................... 26
3. Achilles slaying Penthesilia, 500-450 B.C. ................................. 50
INTRODUCTION

In the year 274, Romans witnessed what the Historia Augusta described as a “most brilliant spectacle” -- a triumph on a lavish scale not seen in a generation\(^1\). The Emperor Aurelian, rode through the city streets of Rome in a magnificent chariot said to have belonged to the king of the Goths, pulled by four matching white stags and followed by 800 pairs of gladiators, 20 elephants and hundreds of wild beasts. The procession was so massive it took hours to wend its way past the cheering throngs. There was reason to celebrate. Aurelian had succeeded, in just a few short years, in re-uniting an empire that been fractured for more than a generation\(^2\).

But the showpiece of the triumph was Queen Zenobia of Palmyra. She had had the stunning audacity to raise a coalition army of disgruntled Easterners and briefly snatch away a third of the Roman Empire -- including its crown jewel Egypt -- before being soundly defeated by Aurelian. The ever-colorful SHA describes the captive queen as riding along the parade route in a magnificent chariot weighted down by so many pearls and gems that attendants had to help carry her golden chains.

Zenobia would have represented everything that was held despicable by the ruling male elite of Rome. She was a woman who had thrust herself into military and political spheres, which were considered bastions of masculinity. She had
tried, even briefly succeeded, in ripping the Empire apart. She was a rich and powerful Eastern female in a world where females were often viewed in literature and historical narratives as conniving, unreliable and dangerous. She was, in short, much like the woman she claimed as her direct ancestor – Cleopatra, who had for generations been vilified as the epitome of depravity. Romans had also heaped scorn and disdain on other foreign queens, such as Dido of Carthage, Berenice of Judea and Boudica of Britain. It would therefore follow that Zenobia, who had humiliated Rome with her military successes, would be held in contempt by the citizens who lined the streets of Rome that triumphant day.

And yet, a number of ancient historians suggest that instead Zenobia was generally admired. Zosimus declares that she had the “courage of a man” and that even Aurelian himself was reputed to have praised her as a worthy foe. The SHA states the triumphant emperor granted her clemency and that she was allowed to live out her years in the comfort of a villa in Tivoli.³

Why then was Zenobia accorded some respect, while other female rulers were subject to scathing propaganda? The reasons were varied and complex. And while there’s not a wealth of extant literature from the late classical period, there is enough evidence from a myriad of sources to piece together an image of Zenobia that was likely presented to the Roman people for propaganda purposes. Through these examples we can discern some of the reasons behind
her public rehabilitation as a worthy foe, rather than a despicable Eastern queen, and determine how Zenobia was used to bolster the prestige of one emperor and to denigrate the reputation of others.
CHAPTER I
A BRIEF HISTORY OF ZENOBIA

The study of the Roman late classical period is hindered by the lack of coherent and reliable ancient source material. The Scriptores Historia Augusta (SHA) provides the most detailed information about Zenobia and while most modern historians have concluded it’s riddled with errors and fabrications, the SHA is still useful in providing some insight into the propaganda and perceptions of the era. Later historians, most notably Zosimus, who lived only two centuries later, had access to primary sources now lost to us. Sadly there are no Latin or Greek literary texts – letters, plays or poems – to draw upon. But Zenobia, by virtue of her gender and achievements, was one of the more fascinating figures of the 3rd century so we do find her mentioned in Arab histories and even, briefly, in the Jewish Talmud. There’s also some archeological evidence linked to her brief reign, including the remarkably well preserved ruins of her city, Palmyra. Through this myriad of sources we can easily piece together the narrative of Zenobia’s trajectory and downfall, and from them also we will later be able to parse information useful in understanding the Roman perceptions of her rebellion.

Zenobia’s history is closely tied to that of her city. Located in what’s now modern-day Syria, Palmyra – known as Tadmor in Semitic language - was not much more than an outpost.
When Marc Antony tried to capture it toward the end of the Roman Republic it had a small population. But in less than 100 years it was to become an important asset of the Empire. It commanded an enviably strategic location. An oasis situated halfway between the Mediterranean and the Euphrates River, Palmyra provided a bridge between the Roman Empire in the West and Persia in the East. More importantly, it was the first Roman outpost reached by caravans taking the long overland trek known as the ‘Silk Road’ from China. During the time of Zenobia, the route ran 5,000 miles across the Asian continent, through Persia and on to Palmyra. Once they reached the oasis city, merchants laden with bolts of silks, incense and spices goods could either break to the Northeast and head for Rome, or turn south toward Egypt. On the return trip, they would launch from Palmyra loaded with Roman saffron, dates and pistachios to bring back into Asia. But either coming or going, they first they had to pay taxes on their imported goods, as well as pay for all of the goods and services that Palmyra had to offer those coming off, or embarking on, a long arduous journey across Central Asia.

As Rome grew so did its demand for luxuries – spices, incense and precious stones all passed through Palmyra on their way to Rome. But the most important luxury to Palmyra’s economy was silk. China discovered how to manufacture the material sometime before 3,000 BC, using fibers from the cocoon of a worm that
lives in mulberry bushes. The country closely guarded the secret of silk production even as it began to trade the cloth to an ever-widening international market. Silk was first known to have reached Rome at the end of the Republic and was immediately coveted by the elite as a sign of wealth and power. As the Roman Empire grew in size and wealth, so too did the demand for Chinese silk. Old-fashioned Romans may have scorned it as an effeminate luxury, but Easterners were gaining influence and they had no such qualms.

Palmyra grew along with the demand for the silk that passed through its portals. By all outward appearances Palmyra was a solidly Roman city; a sprawling metropolis with monumental arches and Corinthian colonnades its architecture was distinctly influenced by the Roman model. Because the city was destroyed and abandoned, it’s still possible to walk down the kilometer-long main thoroughfare flanked by the ruins of more than 1,500 columns, past the footprints of the Senate, banks, a theater and nymphaea.

But there are also clear signs that the residents of Palmyra were from Assyrian nomadic stock and at home in the desert. Mesopotamian influences are seen in surviving artwork and everywhere are images of the camels that made it possible for the caravans to cross vast stretches of desert. Their ghostly faces stare over the shoulders of funeral portraits in the tombs of the city’s elite. The massive Roman-looking temple at the end of the main colonnade was not
dedicated to a Roman god or deified emperor, but to the Babylonian deity Bal, god of the sun and of war.

Many of the surviving inscriptions are in a special dialect of Palmyrene Aramaic. Scholar Aleric Watson has made a case that the citizens of Palmyra spoke their native language almost exclusively and that even the educated elite, including Zenobia, struggled with Latin and Greek. It’s perhaps notable that even today there are residents in communities surrounding the ruins of Palmyra who still speak the dying language of Aramaic rather than Arabic, suggesting an independent spirit lives on in their descendents. Despite outward appearances of Romanization, it would seem Palmyrenes were a proud and independent people, as were other colonies within the empire. The harmony enjoyed between Palmyra and Rome over the centuries of the early Empire may have hinged on Rome’s liberal taxation policies that promoted free trade and private enterprise. In 217 BCE, Caracalla declared Palmyra a colony, which made it exempt from taxes. This favored status allowed the once-nomadic people of the desert to flourish, bolstered too by Rome’s stable currency and a common market that stretched throughout the Mediterranean.

Palmyra was well established by the time Julia Aurelia Zenobia was born sometime around 240, the daughter of an Arab chieftain whose cognomen Aurelia would suggest the family had been Roman citizens for close to a
century. There is speculation that her mother may have been from Egypt since Zenobia appears to have spoken the Egyptian language well and famously claimed direct descent from Cleopatra.

In Arabic literature, the historian Al-Tabari, who lived four centuries later, maintains that Zenobia took over her father’s tribe upon his death and led them on their nomadic wanderings between seasonal pastures. If true, it would be a remarkable accomplishment given that she was likely a teenage girl in a decidedly paternalistic society. But it would help explain how she was able to easily assume command of the Palmyrene army following the death of her husband – having had experience in directing the affairs of men. It would also explain traits that later astounded the Romans, such as her expertise in riding horses and her ability to endure long marches with her troops.

A woman who came to maturity leading a tribe of nomads across the harsh landscape of Syria would be made of sturdy stuff. It’s not known at what point she married the great Palmyrene king Septimus Odaenathus, who was a distant member of her tribe. She was not his first wife, since he already had a grown son who had been designated his heir, but she was married to him long enough that at his death in 266-7 she had borne him at least one son and possibly several other children, suggesting she was quite a young bride. Their marriage may have been an alliance between two factions of a larger clan, which would
suggest that Odaenathus was as attracted to Zenobia’s power and influence as well as her famed beauty.

By Zenobia’s time, Palmyra was experiencing a serious financial setback that would help shape the course of her stratospheric trajectory as queen of the East. Earlier, in about 227, the Sassanids of Persia had seized control or the Euphrates River and were intermittently blocking the Silk Road that was Palmyra’s lifeline. The Persians became increasingly bold over the decades as the Roman Empire suffered a near economic and political collapse. In a 50 year period, Rome saw roughly two dozen emperors seize power and almost all were assassinated or defeated in battle by their successors. Armies were wielded by generals to fight each other for supremacy – not to conquer new territories for plunder. As a result Rome’s economy was faltering and its borders were no longer well defended. Germanic tribes took advantage of the internecine strife to mount raids on the Empire – some penetrating into Italy itself – and the Persians too seized the opportunity to push West into Roman territory.

Under the able rule of Shapur, the Persians conquered Mesopotamia, advanced into Syria and got as far west as Antioch, which they plundered. The emperor Valerian set out to drive them back, but suffered the ignominy of being captured alive. According to the SHA, Valerian’s son, the new emperor Gallienus, seemed unable or perhaps unwilling to retaliate against his father’s
humiliating defeat and death, so “Odaenathus the Palmyrene gathered together an army and restored the Roman power almost to its pristine condition.”

The king of Palmyra attacked Shapur’s forces as they returned from Antioch, before they crossed the Euphrates, and through a series of successful campaigns beat them back across the Empire’s borders. Odaenathus motive was not merely loyalty to Rome – he was protecting the interests of Palmyra against Persian interference along the Silk Road.

However, Gallienus was grateful – if not a little alarmed by the king’s increasing military might. In return for his help keeping the Persians in check, Odaenathus was first made governor of Syria and then, a few years later, governor of the entire Eastern part of the Empire. His influence increased in 261 when he killed a rival of Gallienus’ and became, in turn, the defacto sovereign of Rome’s eastern empire, proclaiming himself ‘king of kings.’ Emboldened, Odaenathus marched his armies east and drove the Persians back even further, going so far as to enter the Persian capitol of Ctesiphon near what is now Baghdad. The interests of Palmyra and Rome were conveniently the same, and by subduing the Persians he was able to strengthen Palmyra’s economic footing while also helping out the beleaguered Roman emperor.

Little is mentioned of Zenobia during this period – save for one telling note in the SHA that the queen accompanied Odaenathus on his Persian campaigns
along with their two young sons and the king’s heir Herodes, his son by an earlier wife. While there are historical accounts of wives accompanying their husbands into battle – such as Germanicus’s loyal spouse Agrippina – it was still an unusual arrangement in the ancient world and perhaps more so in Eastern culture. Odaenathus was in no way assured of victory, so there was much risk in following him into the heart of Persian territory. The comment suggests Zenobia was fearless and able to withstand the hardship of a military march across the Syrian desert – with two youngsters in tow. It is her first mention in the SHA, and immediately she is identified as a formidable woman in a military context.

Odaenathus’ victory over the Sassanid Persians helped secure the Empire, but it’s likely Rome looked somewhat askance at the growing military might of the quasi-independent Palmyra. The Emperor Gallienus named Odaenathus ‘Leader of the Romans’ and, after his victory over Persia, bestowed the even more impressive title of Imperator of the entire East (totius Orientis imperator). Odaenathus went further, styling himself with the Persian title ‘King of Kings’ (shah-shahna) without Rome’s permission. Gallienus, battling the Sythians, was in no position to challenge him.

But Odaenathus did not have long to savor his remarkable victories or his elevation to King of Kings. He was killed shortly afterwards in Antioch by a relative, along with his elder son and heir, Herodes. There was some speculation
in the ancient histories that the Emperor Gallienus, becoming fearful of the Palmyra’s military might, conspired to have Odaenathus secretly assassinated. 11 The inconsistent SHA first blames the king’s death on revenge by Persian gods, but then states that it was a conspiracy orchestrated by Zenobia to ensure that her son, rather than Herodes, inherited the throne. Zonaras, writing in the 12th century from sources now lost to us, has the most credible version of the murder, stating the royal father and son were killed by the king’s disgruntled nephew who had been punished for misbehaving during a family hunting expedition. 12 Whatever the motive, Odaenathus’s death left a power vacuum in the East that was quickly filled by his widow.

Like many powerful women of antiquity, Zenobia ruled nominally through her young son, believed to be called Vaballathus, who officially assumed all of his father’s impressive titles without petitioning Rome for permission. According to Zosimus, she had the assistance of her husband’s friends and advisors, and had a seasoned army at her command headed by the capable general Zabdas. She also would have had a considerable fortune at her disposal given that Odaenathus had just plundered much of the wealth of the Persian Empire. Zosimus notes that she was just as capable as the recently deceased king.

Rome’s reaction to Zenobia at this point is unrecorded. Gallienus was not focusing on the East but on the North and to the West, where the general
Postumus had seized control. During the ensuing battles, Gallienus was murdered by a cabal of his own generals and Claudius II was declared emperor. In his brief 18-month-reign, the new emperor managed to win some important victories against invading Germanic tribes to the North and wrestled Spain and parts of Gaul away from the pretender, Postumus. But he was felled by a fever in the early part of 270. His successor was his brother Quintillus, who ruled only a few months before Aurelian seized power.

Perhaps taking advantage of the chaos throughout the empire, Zenobia consolidated her power and dispatched Zabdas and the Palmyrene army south to Egypt in 269. An Egyptian named Timagenes had mounted a rebellion on behalf of Palmyra while the Roman governor was absent from Alexandria chasing pirates. Again, there are conflicting versions among historians and it’s not clear whether Zenobia seized an unexpected opportunity, or if the conquest of Egypt was a vast plan hatched earlier by Odaenathus.

Either way, it was not an easy victory. According to Zosimus, the Palmyrenes were initially able to seize control of Alexandria, but were driven out when the governor returned with an army of Roman, Egyptian and African soldiers. In a fatal error, the governor tried to chase his enemies back to Syria. The Palmyrenes, familiar with the desert terrain, spun around and went on the attack, winning a decisive victory. Zenobia, through her son, was now queen of
Egypt. Inscriptions found in the region that date from this era grant the title of king to Vaballathus, while referring to Zenobia as queen and mother of the king.

However, Zenobia didn’t declare a complete break from Rome. She seemed to want to find some balance between assuming power over Egypt without completely antagonizing the new emperor Aurelian or the Romans who populated the East. The coins she minted from this era don’t portray her as a queen, but instead proclaim Vaballathus and Aurelian as joint rulers of Egypt. The Roman Emperor was even honored on inscriptions within Palmyra itself. But by putting the Emperor and her son on equal footing, Zenobia was flagrantly defying the accepted forms of the Roman Empire, and she further pushed the boundaries by adopting titles for herself and Vaballathus of Augusta and Augustus, which had previously been the sole domain of the Imperial family. Alaric Watson convincingly argues that Zenobia didn’t seriously believe that Aurelian would somehow ignore her grab for power - as long as she included his name on coins and papyrus. Instead, he suggests, she was trying to placate the Roman administration that was entrenched in the East. She could convince them to continue working for her, as long as she maintained the convenient fiction that they were in fact working on behalf of Aurelian as well.¹³

Flushed with her success with Egypt, Zenobia continued to expand her empire by conquering Lebanon and parts of Anatolia. Historic sources would
suggest she accomplished this feat with persuasion, as much as with her military might, since there’s no record of armed conflict. A Roman of Eastern heritage, widow of highly-regarded rule, Zenobia would appeal to communities that were perhaps becoming increasingly uncomfortable under the yoke of Roman domination. For decades Rome had been embroiled in what has become known as the ‘Crisis of the Third Century’ (235 and 284); a period of such internecine violence that Rome saw the rapid rise and fall of dozens of emperors and the near collapse of the Empire’s economy. Zenobia and her wealthy city would have offered some measure of stability.

She was also notably inclusive. Perhaps taking a page from the Augustan handbook on ruling an empire, she was tolerant of all religions to the point where there’s some debate that she actually may have converted to Christianity or Judaism. In her brief appearance in the Jewish Talmud, Zenobia releases an honored rabbi from captivity at the behest of two Jewish envoys. A more substantial example of her religious tolerance is an engraving found in Cairo where Zenobia grants refuge status to a synagogue.

As for her ties to Christianity, the queen was believed to have given her protection to Paul of Samosata, a bishop of Antioch was disposed by a synod for heresy. Our only source for this is a contemporary letter issued by the church for general circulation. Scholars have noted that Paul had a following in Antioch,
and by protecting him, Zenobia was appealing to their loyalty.\textsuperscript{16}

Whatever her methods, Zenobia was in the early part of the 270s more or less entrenched as ruler of a third of the Roman Empire, stretching from Egypt to modern-day Turkey and as far East as Baghdad. She was minting coins, issuing edicts and controlling vital trade routes in the Empire, including the shipments of corn from the bread-basket of Egypt directly to Rome. Previous emperors may have been too embattled for their own lives to check her or Odaenathus’ growing power grab, but Aurelian was a different story.

The emperor is an integral part of Zenobia’s history. He was born to obscure parents in an outpost of the Roman Empire that is today Serbia, but Aurelian soon distinguished himself as a capable soldier and leader. He had ample opportunity to hone his military skills during the Crisis of the Third Century, and was instrumental in Gallienus’ major victory, the Battle of Naissus, which drove back Germanic invaders. Some histories maintain that when Quintillus assumed power at the death of his brother, the army refused to accept him as emperor and proclaimed the well-respected Aurelian in his stead.

Zonaras suggested Quintillus named Aurelian his heir on his deathbed, which may have been a fiction to promote the new emperor’s legitimacy. By whatever means, Aurelian was in power by the summer of 270. At that point, Zenobia had already conquered Egypt and, perhaps realizing that Aurelian was made of
sterner stuff than his predecessors, soon began minting coins that depicted him as a co-ruler to her son Vaballathus.

But for the moment, Aurelian was like his predecessors, too pre-occupied with other pressing concerns to deal with Zenobia. Zosimus relates that soon after Aurelian assumed power, the Sythians mounted a major invasion. But Rome’s clever new ruler managed to thwart their ambitions by snatching away all of the crops and domesticated animals in their path, leaving them starved and weakened. As soon he drove them out of the Empire, he was beset by invading Germanic hordes, and managed to defeat them as well. Back in Rome, he assuaged fears of foreign invasion by ordering the construction of the massive defensive wall around the city that still partially stands today.

Aurelian was now secure enough to challenge Zenobia to the East. As he marched toward Palmyra, a number of key city states capitulated without a fight but Antioch was still in Zenobia’s grip. The SHA states that the two leaders clashed outside of the city at Daphne. Zosimus doesn’t name the battlefield but provides more details, recording that Aurelian routed the larger Palmyrene forces by pretending to retreat. The heavily-suited cavalry pursued them until they were exhausted by the ‘excess of the heat and the weight of their armour, so they could pursue them no longer.’ Then Aurelian’s forces charged, slaughtering the Palmyrenes and their horses. According to this account, Zenobia and her
general Zabdas, stole out of Antioch before word of their defeat became widespread, and fled further east.

Aurelian pursued them, engaging in a decisive battle at Emesa, now the modern-day city of Homs in Western Syria. According to Zosimus, the Romans once again faced an army of superior numbers – an ‘impressive’ coalition of some 70,000 men - and once again they pretended to retreat so that the cavalry would chase. When the coalition forces stumbled in disorganization, Aurelian’s better-trained troops were able to defeat them decisively. The less-pragmatic SHA attributes the victory to divine province; contending that a supernatural force overcame the wearied Roman troops that allowed them to fight with vigor. Once again, Zenobia had no recourse but to flee further east, this time to the very gates of Palmyra. Zosimus records that in her haste to beat a retreat, she left her considerable treasury in Emesa for Aurelian to plunder.

Hoping to break Zenobia’s grip once and for all, the Roman emperor pursued her across the Syrian Desert. It was not an easy trek. The SHA says they were beset by Syrian ‘brigands’ and that the emperor himself was wounded by an arrow. In Zosimus’ version they were welcomed and given sustenance by the locals. In either case, he arrived at Zenobia’s stronghold and proceeded to lay siege. The SHA includes a letter purportedly written by Aurelian demanding her surrender, and her letter in response, which insolently predicts his defeat once
the coalition forces she was expecting arrived. They didn’t. And in a last ditch
gamble, Zenobia fled once again to the east, on the back of a camel, hoping to
raise troops among the Persians.

She didn’t make it very far. Zosimus records she was captured while trying to
cross the Euphrates River in a boat and brought back to Aurelian in chains. It’s
worth noting here that the Arab version of Zenobia’s life differs radically from
that of Roman and later Western historians. In his Arabic History of Prophets and
Kings, the Persian historian Al-Tabari, who lived 500 years after Zenobia, writes
that she battled not Aurelian but a fellow tribal leader named Jadhima. To
keep the peace she offers to marry him, but then has him killed when he arrives
for the wedding. His nephew besieges Palmyra in retaliation and Zenobia flees,
as she does in the Roman histories, on the back of a camel and is caught at the
Euphrates. (Zosimus has her escaping over the river, al-Tabari has her escaping
under it – through a tunnel she’d had the foresight to build.) While the Arabic
version of Zenobia’s life was unlikely to have been known to Roman audiences, it
contains several of the same elements of propaganda that were widely circulated
in Western antiquity that will be examined later.

Zenobia’s final fate varies widely – from instant death to a long life in a
Roman villa. The SHA has her taken back in chains for Aurelian’s spectacular
triumph, where she garnered the admiration of the crowds. The 12th century
historian Zonaras quotes sources as saying she married a distinguished husband in Rome and that Aurelian married one of her daughters. While Zosimus, which has the most plausible account of Zenobia’s history, maintains she was put on trial and acquitted. His sources contend that she died soon thereafter, either from starvation or disease, and that Aurelian rode in his triumph without her. The historian Orosius, who was born only a century after the events, does not even record her death. She simply disappears from the narrative.¹⁸

This is the bare outline of Zenobia’s colorful history – a framework on which was built myth and legend. That a woman briefly wrested away almost a third of the Roman Empire, even during chaotic times, was a stunning achievement, and one that needed to be carefully presented to a Roman audience during a vulnerable point in its history.
CHAPTER II
QUEENLY REPUTATIONS

The poet Martial paints a devastating portrait of the type of woman most despised by Roman men:

You lie around in an Egyptian wig like Cleopatra, flashing false teeth and winking phony eyelashes, rummaging through silk dresses in a hundred drawers. With an artificial face unfit to launch a sinking barge you expose your manhandled baubles and hoary targe. Still you give out generously to all comers.¹

Rich, foreign, powerful and highly sexed, Cleopatra and Helen were two queens from the East who created chaos and discord in the realm of men. Martial’s passage embodies the deep-seated disgust and anxiety evoked by Eastern queens among the male Roman elite. To understand Roman attitudes toward Zenobia, and how Aurelian may have manipulated her image, it’s important to first examine the long-standing prejudice held by many Romans against her ilk.

Zenobia was not the first foreign woman to lead men into armed conflict, and her predecessors likely had a significant impact on her reputation. Ancient historians suggest Zenobia was aware of the power of these historical queens and evoked their memories in order to enhance her standing. At the same time, I would argue that Aurelian’s proponents – and perhaps the emperor himself – also likened Zenobia to powerful women of history in order to emphasize that
she was an enemy of Rome and to enhance Aurelian’s own prestige.

The ancient world was widely influenced by the story of Helen and the Trojan War, especially as told by Homer, and it’s likely the tale helped shape Roman attitudes toward women who cause international conflict. The Spartan queen is represented in both a positive and negative light in ancient literature. In the Roman *Aeneid*, unlike the Greek *Iliad*, Helen is not so much as a pawn of the gods but a manipulative queen who uses her devastating sexual allure to seduce and betray men on an epic scale, leading to death and destruction of heroic men. Whether viewed with vexation or sympathy, Helen was likely regarded as one of the first women to have propelled men into war and chaos.

The poet Horace, writing in the time of Augustus, surmises that while Helen was the most famous woman to cause men to die in battle, she was the not the only one. “Many a woman has been the dismal cause of war: but those fell by unknown deaths.” So to the Romans, Zenobia would not have been an aberration. She was just the latest in a long line of disruptive women dating from the dawn of recorded history or, if we are to believe Horace, who existed even before history was recorded.

Not only was Zenobia part of a long tradition of disruptive queens, but she was also closely associated with two of Rome’s most notorious female enemies: Cleopatra and Dido. According to the SHA, in *The Lives of the Thirty Pretenders*,
she claimed descent from one and the mantle of the other: “... boasting herself to the 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, she held the imperial power in the names of her sons ....”²

Leaving Cleopatra aside for the moment, Zenobia’s identification with Dido was likely to have been a red flag to the Roman public. In Virgil’s *Aeneid*, the queen of Carthage unknowingly attempts to sabotage the founding of Rome by delaying Aeneas on his journey to Latium and then curses the future empire on her deathbed. Her clash with Rome presages the Carthaginian wars that raged during the Roman Republic. Although Virgil was sympathetic to Dido, who committed suicide when Aeneas abandoned her, he still harps on the danger she poses to the epic’s hero. On her deathbed she threatens to punish Aeneas from Hades and vows to follow him “with dark fires.” Mercurcy warns Aeneas that she, like all women, “is ever fickle and changeable.”³

Tellingly, Dido’s suitor Iarbus compares Aeneas to Helen’s lover Paris, thus suggesting Dido is like the disreputable Helen – a woman who creates discord among men. It would seem the Romans couldn’t resist drawing parallels between powerful women. In the *Aeneid*, Dido is likened to Helen. In the *SHA*, Zenobia is linked to Dido. These associations were a powerful reminder to Roman audiences
of the perils of women rulers.

And there was no greater peril, perhaps, than Cleopatra. Even if Zenobia had not claimed descent from the Egyptian Queen, the similarities between them would have been striking to a Roman populace. Both were powerful exotic women of the East who ruled Egypt and defied the Roman Empire.

It’s even possible Zenobia was indeed descended from the Egyptian Queen, whose daughter with Antony, Cleopatra Selene II, survived to have children of her own. Some Arab historians have speculated Zenobia’s mother was a descendent of Selene’s granddaughter Drusilla of Mauretania, who settled in Syria and married the king of Emesa.

Whether she had a biological link to Cleopatra or not, Zenobia’s claim of descent from the famed queen would have served several purposes. It would have enhanced her prestige as a member of an ancient royal family and would have perhaps served to legitimize her seizure of Egypt. Who better to rule the ancient kingdom than the heir of its last pharaoh? And since Cleopatra claimed a connection to Dido, “even assuming her diadem,” then Zenobia could trace her lineage to the dawn of the region’s history – to a time when men and gods both walked the Earth. The same tactic had been used by Julius Caesar and his nephew Augustus, whose claim of descent from Aeneas made them de facto relatives of Aeneas’ divine mother, Venus. An old and august royal pedigree went
far in the ancient world.

Some surviving artifacts suggest Zenobia openly identified with her famous ancestor. In an inscription believed to be from lower Egypt, and now housed in Cairo, Zenobia associates herself with Cleopatra’s family the Ptolemys in granting worshippers the right to use a house of prayer as a refuge. The Greek historian Callinicus Suetorius also dedicated a 10-volume history of Alexandria to Zenobia by referring to her as ‘Cleopatra.’ He must have known the title would have flattered her, and it’s perhaps one that she was already using as she assumed power in Egypt.

Perhaps the most striking piece of propaganda from Zenobia’s reign is a widely circulated coin that was believed to have been minted in Antioch. On the obverse is a portrait of Zenobia, with the AVG after her name that denotes Augusta. On the reverse is Juno, the most powerful of the goddesses, holding a patera as a symbol of piety and with a peacock, the symbol of longevity, at her feet. In the background is a star, which may have been an Egyptian symbol of the afterlife. Strikingly, Zenobia’s hair is arranged in what author Diana Kleiner describes as a ‘melon’ shaped hairstyle that was often used by Cleopatra. 5 Kleiner believes the hairstyle was based on wigs worn by the earliest Egyptians and that Cleopatra adopted it in later centuries to symbolically strengthen her ties to the country she ruled. By looking like an ancient Egyptian ruler, the
Macedonian Cleopatra was legitimizing her power over the nation her family had seized centuries earlier. It’s possible Zenobia could have been seeking to emulate Cleopatra with her elaborate coiffure. And like Cleopatra, she likely was also evoking Egyptian imagery in a bid to strengthen her hold on the country.

FIGURE 1

Zenobia 271-272 A.D.

FIGURE 2

Cleopatra 51-30 B.C.

It’s also noteworthy that Zenobia’s nose and chin are prominent, like those of her famous ancestor, and her portrait rests on a half moon crescent, which could possibly be homage to Cleopatra’s daughter Cleopatra Selene. Coinage was one
of the primary methods for rulers in the ancient world to spread propaganda to a wide audience. Zenobia’s mint could have been projecting the image she wished to manufacture – that she was the living embodiment of Egypt’s last pharaoh. It intimated she was a powerful queen like Juno on the reverse, whose image is capped by the legend REGINA. Perhaps it was also suggesting that Cleopatra’s reign continued through Zenobia with the peacock and star symbolizing longevity and life after death. This widely circulated coin of a second Cleopatra would have been an irritant to the Roman world and Zenobia’s close association with Rome’s historical enemy could have been seen as baiting the emperor.

However, there is also evidence that Zenobia was not actually trying to openly antagonize Rome - at least not in the early days. Throughout the beginning of her reign she attempted to placate the ruling emperors through carefully wording of decrees and inscriptions, which the apparent aim of legitimizing her seizure of power. Another widely circulated coin minted in Antioch under her reign depicts her son Vaballathus on the obverse with Aurelian on the reverse. Aurelian is given the titles of Emperor and Augustus and wears a radiated crown, which symbolized divine honors. Perhaps therefore Zenobia’s identification with Cleopatra was not so much a premeditated insult to Rome, as a ploy designed to make her appear rich and powerful. Perhaps she even hoped Rome’s emperors would see some sort of legitimacy in her seizure of her
‘ancestral’ home and allow her to become the undisputed ruler of the East.

This would help explain why Zenobia’s actively associated herself with Cleopatra. However, I believe there was another factor in play - that it was not only Zenobia who was promoting an association between herself and Cleopatra, but that Aurelian’s supporters were doing so as well. Linking Zenobia and Cleopatra would have also been in the best interests of Aurelian. He would have wanted Zenobia to appear as un-Roman as possible and as an enemy of the empire, so that his campaign to topple her would receive the widest possible support. And perhaps, more importantly, by painting Zenobia as Cleopatra, he could adopt the mantle of Augustus.

Considered the greatest of Rome’s emperors, Augustus had united an empire fractured for decades by civil war and had ushered in what was widely touted as a “golden age” of peace and prosperity. He had also been a master of propaganda and many of his successors tried to emulate his success. By skillfully manipulating Cleopatra’s reputation in Rome, Augustus was able to justify his campaign against Marc Antony and the annexation of Egypt. With a similar strategy, Aurelian could conceivably not only gain popular support but also present himself as a new Augustus, who was uniting the Empire and restoring peace and prosperity to the Roman people. Therefore, while Zenobia clearly established a link between herself and Cleopatra, the association may have been
further exaggerated by historians wishing to enhance Aurelian’s prestige.

By examining the impact Cleopatra had on the Roman psyche, it’s possible to better grasp the dynamics between Zenobia and Aurelian. Cleopatra was depicted during the Augustan era as the antithesis of the ideal woman, i.e. she was sexually voracious, vain, lavish, emasculating and meddled in the affairs of men. Augustus was able to further emphasize Cleopatra’s faults by having her compared with his sister Octavia, Marc Antony’s wife, whose public image was of a proper Roman matron - a devoted wife and mother, modest and retiring.

By making Cleopatra as un-Roman as possible, and monstrous in the eyes of the Roman people, Augustus was able to gain support for his campaign against the widely popular Marc Antony. In an effective strike, Augustus had Antony’s will read to the Roman populace, revealing that their former hero was planning to leave vast tracks of the empire to his illegitimate children by his foreign queen. By thus manipulating public opinion, Augustus could present his military campaign as more than just a civil conflict between two prominent Roman politicians vying for power. He could instead be seen as a savior, not only of Roman territory, but also of Roman values.

Cleopatra was therefore a popular subject for poets and historians of the Augustan age who were eager to curry the favor of the imperial family. They accused the Egyptian queen of being vain and lavish to a fault, describing her
barges, musicians, jewels and perfume. Several relay the story that she dissolved a single spectacular pearl into a glass of vinegar at dinner, so that she could boast to Antony that she had consumed a banquet worth a fortune. She’s even mentioned in the remarkable correspondence of Cicero. “I cannot recall the arrogance of the queen, when she lived on the estate across the Tiber, without great anguish,” he wrote to Atticus.

Lucan compared her with Helen: “Cleopatra was the dishonor of Egypt, the savage fury of Latium, the unchaste downfall of Rome. As much as that Spartan woman routed Argos and Troy with her baneful beauty.” In his *Elegies*, Propertius likens Cleopatra not only to Helen, but also to Dido and the despicable Medea, who betrayed her father and later slew her children. It is a re-occuring pattern – a current queen is compared to her predecessors as a warning to the Roman people of the dangers posed by powerful women. Just as Cleopatra was linked to Helen, Dido and other notorious female rulers, so too would Zenobia be linked to Cleopatra. The chain wasn’t broken, just lengthened.

Unfortunately, our sources for Zenobia are meager compared to the wealth of extant material about Cleopatra from the Augustan age. The most colorful account comes from the SHA, which has been proven to be deeply flawed by recent scholars, but as a pro-Aurelian document may contain some of the propaganda he wished to project during his brief reign. For the author(s) of the
SHA, Zenobia was Cleopatra incarnate. One passage notes: “At her banquets she used vessels of gold and jewels, and she even used those that had been Cleopatra’s.”

Both queens were also noted for their fluency in foreign languages. Plutarch wrote of Cleopatra that “her tongue was like a many stringed instrument: she could turn it easily to whichever language she wished and she conversed with few barbarians entirely through an interpreter.” According to the SHA, Zenobia too was educated, although not quite fluent in Latin. “She herself was not wholly conversant with the Latin tongue, but nevertheless, mastering her timidity she would speak it; Egyptian, on the other hand, she spoke very well. In the history of Alexandria and the Orient she was so well versed that she even composed an epitome, so it is said; Roman history, however, she read in Greek.”

The SHA evokes Cleopatra again in a remarkable exchange of purported letters between Aurelian and Zenobia during their final standoff at Palmyra. Aurelian demands her surrender and that she forfeit her luxurious goods; “your jewels, your gold, your silver, your silk, your horses…. “ These are the possessions of a degenerate Eastern queen in the same mold as Cleopatra.

If the parallels between Aurelian/Zenobia with Augustus/Cleopatra are not evident enough, the SHA hammers it home with Zenobia’s alleged letter of reply. She is holed up in her stronghold at Palmyra, just as Cleopatra barricaded herself
in Alexandra. And like Cleopatra, Zenobia is not ready to be easily defeated by
the Roman hero who wants to bring her and her jewels to Rome in triumph.
According to the SHA, when Zenobia received Aurelian’s letter demanding her
surrender, she “responded with more pride and insolence than befitted her
fortunes, I suppose with a view to inspiring fear.” She begins her purported
letter, copied by the SHA author in its entirety, “From Zenobia, Queen of the
East, to Aurelian Augustus.” She pointedly evokes the memory of her claimed
ancestress; “You demand my surrender as though you were not aware that
Cleopatra preferred to die a Queen rather than remain alive, however high her
rank.” This is showdown part II, between an Egyptian queen and a Roman
emperor.

Historians such as Cassius Dio say Augustus was intent on having Cleopatra
star in his triumph and, realizing that she would try to kill herself following her
defeat, had her carefully guarded. Famously, she managed to elude him and
commit suicide, perhaps with a poisonous snake smuggled into her quarters.
Suetonius notes that, “Octavian wanted so badly to take Cleopatra alive for
display in his triumph that he even employed snake charmers to suck the venom
from her wounds.” Thwarted, Augustus instead had to settle for having an
effigy of Cleopatra carried in his triumph, reportedly with a stuffed asp clasped to
her breast.
Later historians noted that Aurelian, like Augustus, also wanted to capture Zenobia alive to display in Rome. His massive triumph was an important aspect of his short reign and the queen was to be the centerpiece of victorious celebrations that were perhaps the most lavish of the late Classical era of ancient Rome. Even a thousand years later, the Byzantine monk Zonaras would include in his brief history of Aurelian that the triumph featured six hundred and thirty seven teams of four elephants. The earlier historian Zosimus, the most sober of Aurelian’s ancient biographers, would note that the emperor was ‘most magnificently’ received by the senate and the people. The SHA, of course, breathlessly chronicles the extensive spectacle and Zenobia’s role as the star of the pageant.

Aurelian’s splashy triumph suggests he – like Augustus before him - was an emperor who cared about public perception and his legacy. And it stands to reason he would therefore care about the way his defeat of Zenobia would play out in Rome, and perhaps even down through history. But he faced a fundamental problem – how to crow over the victory of a mere woman. It had not been such a major problem for Augustus. Technically, he had defeated the respected general Antony – not Cleopatra - in a brilliant naval battle. It was an honorable victory worthy of public acclimation. But Zenobia was a ruler in her own right. Her consort was dead and her son was a boy – she stood alone as the
de facto power of the East.

There’s much we don’t know about Aurelian, but we do know that he was deeply concerned about how his battles against a woman would be perceived by posterity. It’s one of the few aspects of his rule that’s well documented. The Byzantine historian Zosimus, wrote in his lengthy and positive history of Aurelian that the emperor was “much pleased” when Zenobia was captured and brought to him in chains, but that “he became uneasy at the reflection that the future ages would not redound to his honor to have conquered a woman.” The SHA mentions two letters purportedly written by Aurelian on the same subject. In one, he “confesses” to a colleague “without the wonted reserve of an emperor” that he knows “the Romans are saying that I am merely waging a war with a woman.” In the other purported letter, also printed by the SHA, he writes to the senate, “I have heard, Conscript Fathers, that men are reproaching me for having performed an unmanly deed in leading Zenobia to triumph.”¹⁶

Aurelian’s fears were probably not unfounded. The Roman male elite believed that conquering a woman was not particularly noteworthy. In the Aeneid, Virgil’s hero acknowledges such even though he’s eager to slay Helen of Troy. “There’s no great glory in a woman’s punishment,” Aeneas opines. “And such a conquest wins no praise.”¹⁷ Even the author(s) of the SHA, a pro-Aurelian document, is compelled to justify the inclusion of Zenobia and the usurper Vitruvia (also
known as Victoria) in *The Lives of the Thirty Pretenders*. The SHA blames Aurelian’s predecessor, the emperor Gallienus, for the anarchy that allowed two women to challenge the Roman Empire. According to one passage, “It was with deliberate purpose that I included the women (Vitruvia and Zenobia), namely that I might make a mock of Gallienus, a greater monster than whom the Roman state has never endured.” A few lines later, the refrain is repeated. Vitruvia and Zenobia would never be included in a history of Rome “had not the ways of Gallienus brought it about that women, too, should be deemed worthy of mention.”

Aurelian, then, had a substantial public relations problem on his hands. In order to unite the empire and celebrate his triumph, he had to subdue a female rebel who had wrested away a third of the empire from his predecessor Gallienus. He managed that military victory relatively easily. Harder still, would be to convince the Roman populace that the deed was worthy of a great emperor. He would need to carefully manage Zenobia’s public image, so that he would be remembered in the SHA and other histories as an emperor in the same mold as Augustus. Comparing Zenobia to Cleopatra - and perhaps to Dido, Helen and other notorious queens – had helped establish his credentials. But it was a delicate balance. If Zenobia was portrayed as too much of a despicable Eastern degenerate, then his victory would be considered shallow. She had to be similar
to Cleopatra in greatness – but different in character. In short, she had to be 
*worthy* of defeat. So at the same time Zenobia was being hailed by Aurelian 
biographers as a second Cleopatra, she was being also being touted as the 
antithesis of Cleopatra – a queen of exceptional qualities that made her a 
formidable enemy of Rome.
CHAPTER III
THE AMAZONIAN TRADITION

A woman's sexuality was central to her position in ancient society. This was an important factor in the propaganda surrounding Zenobia, especially as she was compared to other despised queens such as Cleopatra and Helen. Augustan propaganda had emphasized Cleopatra’s licentious behavior in order to make her as despicable as possible in the eyes of the Roman male elite, who were particularly repulsed by women who destroyed men through seduction. But Aurelian, for reasons outlined earlier, could not cast Zenobia in the exact same mold because he was concerned that his stature would be diminished by a victory over a mere woman.

Therefore while Zenobia was likened to Cleopatra in many instances, historians were also careful to draw a distinction between the two queens so that Zenobia would appear to be a worthy military opponent. Far from being depicted as a wanton Egyptian seductress, Zenobia was legendary for her chastity, which would have made her nobler in the eyes of the Romans. She was also imbued with impressive masculine traits, which differed from Cleopatra, who was widely regarded as corrupted by womanly wiles. I believe that by emphasizing Zenobia’s chastity and masculinity, historians were able to envelop her in the same aura as that of the Amazons.
These women represented some of the greatest heroes of antiquity. Through this clever manipulation, Aurelian could not only adopt the mantle of an Augustus defeating Cleopatra, but also that of an Achilles battling Penthesilea or an Aeneas faced with Camilla.

In order to better understand this complex web of associations it’s important to examine the views of Roman male elite toward women, power and sexuality. Surviving texts, which are almost exclusively the voices of aristocratic men, would suggest they were anxious over the shifting power structure in the Empire which allowed foreigners and women expanded opportunities. In the Republic, a select group of well-born aristocrats had competed with each other in politics and the military for dominance – vying to become the first among equals. But when the Republic fell, power concentrated in the hands of a single emperor and members of his immediate family. All military honors were reserved for the imperial family – by law only they could receive the much-coveted triumphs through the streets of Rome. Administrative power fell into the hands of well-trained slaves and professional freedmen, many of whom became extremely wealthy.

From writings of the era, such as the passage ‘Dinner with Trimalchio’ in the *Satyricon* of Petronius, it seems as though well-born Roman males may have looked askance on the rising power of ex-slaves as their own importance...
diminished. These same aristocratic males were equally ambivalent about the increased independence of women. Michel Foucault suggests that the rise in women’s status was directly linked to the decline in men’s. “The relative modification was due first of all to the fact that the position of the citizen husband lost some of its political importance,” he writes. “It was also due to a strengthening of the role of the wife – of her economic role and her juridical independence.”¹

Roman males seemed particularly wary of wealthy independent women, who were viewed as more likely to be sexually promiscuous. The satirist Juvenal complained that wealth corrupted a woman’s moral fiber. “Poverty made Latin women chaste in the old days,” he contends, but wealth had made them “whorish” and their men weak.² There was a belief that chaste women disavowed luxuries. Funerary monuments to ‘good’ wives often note they dressed modestly or lived simply. “It was not clothes, it was not gold that this woman admired during her lifetime; it was her husband and the good sense that she showed in her behaviour,”³ reads a 4th century monument to Dionysia in Roman Athens. The wealthy, promiscuous woman was a familiar character in satires, poems and plays throughout antiquity. In a scene from *The Swaggering Soldier*, a play by the Roman Plautus based on an earlier Greek work, a well-to-do matron sends her maid to arrange an illicit liaison with a soldier.
Pyrgopolynices: Go to a married woman’s house? And let her husband catch me there?
Maid: She has already turned her husband out for your sake.
Pyrgopolynices: How could she do that?
Maid: Because the house is hers; it was part of her dowry.

Plautus was writing comedy. But successful satire touches on deep-rooted beliefs or fears. A sexually active, independent woman was perceived as a threat to the social order, flipping the power dynamic between men and women. Anxious aristocratic males feared women such as these could reduce men to nothing more than slaves, thus toppling them from the top of the social strata to the bottom. Cleopatra therefore was the quintessential villain – she was a powerful, independent and wealthy female who used her sexual power to enslave the most powerful men in Rome, thus endangering all Roman citizens.

As noted earlier, much of Augustus’ propaganda campaign against Cleopatra was waged on moral grounds. She’d had a liaison with Julius Caesar and then later took up with Marc Antony when Antony was still married to Augustus’ sister Octavia, the paragon of Roman virtue. During the Augustan era, she was widely depicted as promiscuous and out of control. The historian Cassius Dio stated that Cleopatra had “insatiable passion and insatiable avarice.” In On the Civil War, Lucan called her a “dangerous beauty enhanced by cosmetics” and “Egypt’s master, but Rome’s whore.” And to Propertius, she was a “whore queen” who has “trysts with her slaves.” Cleopatra was, notes Joyce Tyldesley, “the most
frightening of Roman stereotypes; the unnatural female. A woman who worshipped crude gods, dominated men, slept with her brothers and gave birth to bastards.”

The female seductress was particularly disturbing to Romans because it was widely believed that female sexuality could sap male virility. “For a female slowly consumes their strength and burns it up,” the poet Virgil wrote in *The Georgics*. Queens such as Cleopatra and Helen did not conquer men on the battlefield, where men held the advantage, but in the bedroom, where they had a distinct disadvantage. Through their unchecked passion they not only destroyed men, but threatened whole nations.

Even great men could be felled by a seductress. Historians contend that Cleopatra schemed her way into the presence of the venerated Julius Caesar by smuggling herself into the palace at Alexandria, and then set out to entrap him with her beguiling ways. As Cassius Dio explains, “since she was beautiful to look at and listen to, she was able to captivate everyone, even a man tired of love and past his prime.” The famed general set her up as undisputed ruler of Egypt then delayed his return to Rome in order to sail with her on a barge up the Nile. Historians say he was criticized for dallying in Egypt rather than tending to the business of ruling the Empire at a critical time in history. But the real blame was placed on Cleopatra, for keeping him from his duty. As Horace put it; “The
Roman soldier alas – though posterity will deny it – enslaved to a woman.” But Caesar ultimately managed to keep his liaison with Cleopatra in check and never presented her to the Roman people as his wife, or as the mother to his heir.

Marc Antony had no such scruples. He publicly married the queen and declared his children with her as the heirs to territory he had conquered. Part of Augustus’ propaganda campaign was to instill the belief that the famed Roman general had been completely corrupted and emasculated by Cleopatra, and that he was no longer able to think or behave rationally because he’d become subservient to her.

In a remarkable speech preserved by Cassius Dio, Octavian (Augustus) charged that Egyptians are “slaves to a woman instead of a man” and that it was shameful for Antony to ‘bow before that woman.” Antony’s fall from grace reflected on all of Rome. “Indeed for us as Romans, rulers of the largest and best part of the world, to be disparaged and downtrodden by an Egyptian woman is to be unworthy of our fathers,” Octavian is recorded to have said. The young Augustus even called Antony ‘effeminate’ for being under the control of a woman. 11

As noted, Augustus was striking a powerful chord with his male aristocratic audience. A Roman master had become the slave while a woman was calling the shots. “She had made of him a tamed and trained man when he passed into
Cleopatra’s hands,” says Plutarch of Antony. In the tradition of drawing comparisons between great queens of yore, the historian likened Antony at the battle of Actium to Helen’s helpless lover. “Like Paris fleeing from battle, he sank into a woman’s bosom. To be exact however, Paris fled to the bedroom after his defeat, but Antony fled in pursuit of Cleopatra and sacrificed his victory.” ¹² Even the prophetic Sybilline Books drew the conclusion that Antony had become the slave of Cleopatra: “Drunken with wine, now shall thy be a slave and wedded in no honorable way.” ¹³

Augustan propaganda emphasized that Augustus, unlike Antony, was man enough to avoid the pitfalls of being enslaved by a woman. In Plutarch’s version of Cleopatra’s meeting with Augustus after her defeat she is crying and blaming others for bad counsel. But Cassius Dio contends the queen tried a third time to seduce the most powerful man in Rome. Unlike Antony though, Octavian (Augustus) remained upright and moral – in short the epitome of a Roman man - and rebuffed her advances. This theme was echoed in Virgil’s Aeneid, which is widely seen as a vehicle to express certain aspects of Augustus’ reign in heroic context. There are similarities between Dido and Cleopatra in the narrative, but Aeneas has the moral fiber and strength to do what is best for Rome and not languish for love of a woman. He leaves Dido and sails from Carthage in order to fulfill his divine destiny to be the founder of Rome. To emphasize the pitfalls that
Aeneas escapes, Virgil describes the shield of Aeneas on which was depicted the battle of Actium. In a clear reference to Cleopatra, he states that in the background of the battle “was the greatest outrage of all, his Egyptian wife.”

As noted earlier, it seems clear the infamy heaped on Cleopatra by Augustan supporters was not only to defame her for her sake, but also to discredit Marc Antony. Author Joyce Tyldesley writes, “Octavian had realized his troops would fight a foreign enemy, but would not fight Antony, who despite all the negative propaganda was still a popular figure.” Since it was a very different set of circumstances for Aurelian, the same strategy would be counter-productive. If he and his supporters were to attack Zenobia on moral grounds by portraying her as licentious, they would be inflaming hatred against her, but diminishing her worthiness as an opponent. She would be a lowly object of contempt and victory over her would be seen to be of little consequence.

Therefore, pro-Aurelian historians took the comparison between Zenobia and Cleopatra only so far. As detailed earlier, they emphasized Zenobia’s august Ptolemaic ancestry, her intellectual prowess and her great wealth – all similarities with her predecessor. But the connection stopped there. In marked contrast to Cleopatra, Zenobia was noted for her sexual restraint and chastity.

As a wife and mother, she was of course not a virgin. But she was perceived as the next closest thing - a staid matron who was so chaste that her sexual life
was almost non-existent. The SHA has a remarkable passage about Zenobia’s marital relations, or lack thereof. “Such was her continence, it is said, that she would not know even her own husband save for the purpose of conception. For when once she had lain with him, she would refrain until the time of menstruation to see if she were pregnant; if not, she would again grant him an opportunity of begetting children.” Far from being insatiable like Cleopatra, Zenobia strictly limited sexual contact to her husband solely for the purpose of procreation.

Other ancient Western historians do not mention Zenobia’s sexuality but her reputation as an extremely chaste woman was possibly widespread because it is also recorded by the 9th century Persian historian al-Tabari. To the Arabs, Zenobia is known as al-Zabba, the daughter of a powerful sheikh and widow of the ruler of Palmyra. In his History of Prophets and Kings, al-Tabari relates that Zenobia entered into marriage negotiations with the great Arab leader Jadhima, whom she held responsible for the death of her father. Jadhima was intrigued by reports of Zenobia’s legendary beauty and eager to gain control of the great city of Palmyra. One of his most loyal advisors warned him that the powerful Syrian queen was likely setting a trap of “sheer treachery.” Undeterred, Jadhima willingly entered Zenobia’s camp with just a few guards for what he believed would be a wedding feast.
But upon meeting him, Zenobia opened her robe and revealed that she had a shockingly excessive amount of pubic hair. “Do you see the concern of a bride,” she exclaimed. Because of her condition, she could not engage in sex and the marriage negotiations were nothing but a sham. Jadhima conceded that a marriage was impossible; “The limit has been reached, the moist ground has dried up.” Her intent all along was to assassinate Jadhima and she does so, having his wrists slit with a razor after he drinks himself into a stupor.  

The SHA mentions nothing of this extraordinary tale, but does record that Zenobia led a circumspect life following the death of her husband. Unlike Cleopatra, who reportedly had trysts with slaves, Zenobia protected her reputation. “As servants she had eunuchs of advanced age,” the author notes in *The Lives of the Thirty Pretenders*. Not only were they castrated, they were elderly. Zenobia was taking no chances that even a breath of scandal would impugn her reputation. Her chastity was as much a part of her public persona as Cleopatra’s alleged promiscuity was of hers.

But why was it so important for the SHA to emphasize the Syrian queen’s purity? Just as the attack on Cleopatra’s sexual habits helped the Augustan cause, it’s likely that the bolstering of Zenobia’s chaste reputation also served a purpose for Aurelian. On its own, the references to Zenobia’s sexual discretion may have been a mere oddity that was duly noted by historians of the day. But
intriguingly, the descriptions of her chastity are interwoven with other narratives that emphasize the tough, even masculine qualities for which she was also famed. It’s possible then that Aurelian propaganda was creating a more complex image of Zenobia – that of an Amazonian-like warrior. Along with their skills as fighters, Amazons were most noted for their legendary chastity. They were an integral part of myth-making in the ancient world and to defeat one on the field of battle would give Aurelian’s victory over Palmyra the respect he so openly desired.

Aurelian and his supporters would have been playing into a deep-seated belief about women, sexuality and strength. The ancients were intrigued by Amazons although it’s not clear whether they truly believed if such women were real, or a myth. Herodotus, in the 5th century B.C., wrote detailed descriptions about Amazonian society but it was thought that they had lived in the distant past and were no longer in existence. Only recently has archeological evidence uncovered graves of heavily armed Scythian women in what is now Turkey. They may have been fought alongside their men in battle. Or, as one archeologist has suggested, they may have banded together to defend themselves while their nomadic husbands were away tending to livestock or on military campaigns.  

Real or not, Amazons captured the imaginations of the ancients. They were part of a long-past golden age, when men and gods walked together on Earth.
In ancient literature, an Amazon was usually described as beautiful, chaste and strong, although not as strong as a man. Her weapon of choice was a bow and arrow, which took accuracy as much as brute strength. Amazons were often associated with the goddess Artemis, the Roman Diana, one of the oldest of the ancient deities. She was a huntress, often depicted also with bow and arrows, and was most noted for her sacred virginity. In several myths, she kills or transforms mortal men who dared to approach her.

Amazons were also likened to the other virgin goddess, Athena, in Latin, Minerva, who was called upon to help men in the course of battle. In art, she was usually depicted in full armor with a helmet, spear and a shield bearing the image of a gorgon. These two powerful goddesses had masculine traits – they hunted and fought successfully. But they were also beautiful and aggressively chaste. Amazons too were said to guard their virtue and lived apart from men. They were for the most part virgins, although there are tales of them lying with men on set occasions in order to beget children, just as Zenobia is said to have orchestrated relations with her husband only in order to conceive.

Mythical history is rich in stories of great Amazons. Hercules had to steal the girdle of the Amazonian queen Hippolyta as the ninth of his twelve labors. The girdle was said to have magical powers, but it would also have been a symbol of sexual mastery. To take Hippolyta’s girdle would entail loosening her robe, thus
compromising her virtue. Hippolyta’s sister Antiope was the wife of Theseus, who abducted her and carried her back to Athens. It was said they hunted together and that she fought alongside him in battle.

The third sister was Penthesilea, who was slain by Achilles when she came to fight on the side of Troy. In myth, all three Amazonian princesses were semi-divine, the daughters of Ares, god of war, and the Amazonian queen Otrera. The story of Penthesilea was told in the Aethiopis, the lost epic believed to have followed the Iliad. Later summaries of the epic cycle say she fought nobly in the Trojan War and slew many Greeks. But she met her match in the legendary Achilles. As he was delivering the fatal blow, he looked into her eyes and fell deeply in love. He was bereft at her death and slew a companion who dared to laugh at his tragic predicament.

The scene was evocative and frequently depicted in Greek, and later Roman art. It’s been found on literally hundreds of ancient Greek vases and has been identified on Roman mosaics in Britain and Turkey. In many of the early Greek images, Penthesilea is shown wearing trousers and a cap in the manner of Persians – perhaps a way to accentuate that she was a foreigner. In other versions, the Amazon wears a loose robe and is bare-legged like Artemis, the virgin hunter. Amazons were also depicted in epic Greek battle scenes, both in sculpture and in paintings.
Romans too were fascinated by these warrior women and we find them in surviving Roman mosaics and murals. A recently discovered villa in Turkey is adorned with representations of all three of the famed sisters and Penthesilea is shown astride a galloping horse.\(^{19}\) There are dozens of Roman statues still in existence of Achilles and Penthesilea, suggesting that the duo were an extremely popular decoration in the villas of the elite. Author Lyn Webster Wild notes that Amazons both fascinated and repelled the ancient world.\(^{20}\) They were exotic, but they turned upside down the accepted conventions of male and female roles. That Amazons were often depicted on their backs, being thrust with a spear, may have been an attempt by artists to either titillate the viewer, or to re-establish a more familiar context to the scene.

**FIGURE 3**

Achilles and Penthesilea. Athenian red figure vase decoration, 500-450 BC

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With the slaying of Penthesilea, the Amazonian race was believed to have been more or less wiped out. The Greek historian Diodorus Siculus, writing in the 1st century B.C., says she was “the last of the Amazons to win distinction for bravery and that for the future the race diminished more and more and then lost all its strength; consequently in later times, whenever any writers recount their prowess, men consider the ancient stories about the Amazons to be fictitious tales.”

But the imagery of the Amazon was resurrected again by Virgil in the *Aeneid*, perhaps the most important piece of Roman literature. In his epic, the Trojans battles Camilla, an Amazonian-like Italian who bursts onto the scene in Latium “exulted in the midst of the slaughter, with one breast bared for battle:” Like the Amazons of Greek myth, she is beautiful, exotic and dangerous, a girl raised in the wilds, who “cherished her love of her weapons and maidenhood.” Scholar Barbara Widen Boyd notes that Virgil emphasizes Camilla’s virginity.\(^{22}\) Turnus first hails her, “O virgin, glory of Italy,” and she is identified as a virgin repeatedly thereafter. Her purity is perhaps only matched by what must have been brute strength. She proceeds to kill Aeneas’ men in hand-to-hand combat with ruthless efficiency. She hacks one of the largest and strongest of the Trojans with an axe “and little room for mercy: as he begged and prayed desperately: the wounds staining his face with warm brain-matter.” This was a
combatant to be reckoned with. She is finally defeated, with the help of the gods, by a spear thrust under her breast that “drank her virgin blood.” She is mourned by her patroness, Artemis, who engineers the swift death of the warrior who chucked the fatal spear.

Throughout literature is the repeated refrain that these chaste warrior women were honorable and deserving of respect. Homer didn’t relay the story of Penthesilea in the *Iliad* but the Trojan king Priam praises Amazons in passing as “women equal of men.” It is a phrase repeated several times in the epic, perhaps a harbinger for the *Aethiopis* which followed the *Iliad* in the epic cycle.

It is in this context that we can more fully appreciate the portrait of Zenobia created in the SHA and the comments by other pro-Aurelian historians. We’ve already examined Zenobia’s legendary chastity – a woman of uncompromising virtue according to Roman sources, and who, in Arab sources, was physically hampered from having sex by a barrier as potent as a magic Amazonian girdle. But she was also said to have been the “equal” of men intellectually, and even physically. Aurelian’s most credible biographer, Zosimus, is sparse in his description of Zenobia but in his first mention of the queen he describes her on equal footing with male rulers. “She was the wife of Odonathus, but had the courage of a man,” he notes simply.

As usual, the SHA has more juicy details to impart about Zenobia’s
personality and peccadilloes. She was, according to the author(s) of *The Lives of the Thirty Pretenders*, a queen who enjoyed the pomp of an Eastern potentate, but who also had distinctly Roman affectations. “It was rather in the manner of the Persians that she received worship and in the manner of the Persian kings that she banqueted; but it was in the manner of a Roman emperor that she came forth to public assemblies…” This dichotomy could be explained by Palmyra’s position as a bridge between East and West. Zenobia was a Syrian queen, but she was legally Roman – the daughter of a Roman citizen and the widow of a Roman client king. But the juxtaposition would also benefit Aurelian propaganda, to wit: She was a “foreigner” and therefore to be regarded as a despised enemy but she was as worthy as a Roman in battle.

The SHA continues the theme that Zenobia was exceptional in that she had masculine, and therefore admirable, traits. Cleopatra may have had the seductive whisper of a temptress, but Zenobia’s “voice was clear and like that of a man.” As noted earlier, the author(s) of the SHA felt the need to apologize for even including women in *The Lives of the Thirty Pretenders* because women were not worthy of discourse in the great history of Rome.

And yet, Zenobia is in certain passages heaped with the same sort of praise that was bestowed upon the venerated Aurelian. Both of them were said to have the qualifications of a great Roman leader – strength mixed with compassion,
firmness countered by reason. “Her sternness, when necessity demanded, was that of a tyrant, her clemency, when her sense of right called for it, that of a good emperor.” These traits were also noted in the single mention of Zenobia in the Jewish Talmud. According to the Hebrew text, when Jewish scholars first appealed to her for the release of their colleague she refused, but then relented when the delegation summoned the sword that killed her husband and stepson.

The SHA also praises Zenobia for her moderation, a trait admired in many great Roman emperors, such as Augustus and Vespasian. She penetrated the domain of men, but not in a wanton manner - she dealt with them on their terms. The history notes that she sometimes drank with her generals, but other times prudently refrained from wine. It notes, “She drank, too, with the Persians and the Armenians, but only for the purpose of getting the better of them.” Just as she got the better of Jadhima, according to Arab lore, getting him drunk while she stayed sober to supervise his assassination. The SHA imbues Zenobia with such ‘masculine’ traits as reasonability and moderation, setting her apart from the widely perceived shortcomings of those of her gender. “Generous with prudence, she conserved her treasures beyond the wont of women,” reads one passage. This is a far cry from the pampered, wanton Cleopatra who, as Lucan writes, wallowed in extravagance.\(^2^4\)

But perhaps the greatest praise for Zenobia comes directly from Aurelian. In
one of two letters the SHA purports were written by the emperor to justify his triumph over a woman, he explains to his critics that she was an extraordinary example of the female sex. “In truth those very persons who find fault with me now would accord me praise in abundance, did they but know what manner of woman she is,” he allegedly wrote. Aurelian goes on to numerate Zenobia’s unusual qualities, which made her a great leader of her empire and a formidable opponent in battle. “How wise in counsels, how steadfast in plans, how firm toward the soldiers, how generous when necessity calls, and how stern when discipline demands.” Aurelian contends that Zenobia was able to conquer much of the East because men were afraid of her and her reputation, so “neither Arabs nor Saracens nor Armenians ever moved against her.” So effusive is he in his praise of the Syrian queen.

Aurelian even goes so far as to suggest that she was the real power behind the success of Odaenathus, a charge made by no other historian. “I might even say that it was her doing that Odaenathus defeated the Persians,” reads part of the letter. Sounding a bit prickly, Aurelian ponders why he is being criticized for having defeated such an impressive enemy when his predecessors were not criticized for the fact that she flourished unchecked under their rule. The letter is a remarkable tribute, and according to the SHA, showed “what opinion Aurelian held concerning Zenobia.” It would seem that in Aurelian’s eyes, the queen was
the equal of any male leader, including her venerated late husband.

The masculine traits attributed to Zenobia put her, like Amazons, on par with men. But the SHA takes the correlation much further. Just as the similarities between her and Cleopatra were emphasized, so too were the parallels between her and Amazonian warriors. According to the SHA, Zenobia was also imbued with the skills of Artemis, a woman who could ride and hunt like a man but who was renowned for her great beauty. According to the SHA, “So white were her teeth that many thought that she had pearls in place of teeth. Her face was dark and of a swarthy hue, her eyes were black and powerful beyond the usual wont, her spirit divinely great, and her beauty incredible.” Many tales of mythic Amazons commented on their great beauty as well as their physical prowess.

Like the Amazons, Zenobia reputedly liked to hunt and was comfortable on horseback. Arab history has her living a semi-nomadic life, traveling from settlement to settlement after she took over her fathers’ tribe. The SHA also says that Zenobia was frequently on the move and eschewed the carts that typically carried women travelers. Instead it notes that she favored chariots, perhaps like those used in combat. But most of the time she rode on horseback or “frequently she walked with her foot-soldiers for three or four miles.” The history also relates that she was, like Artemis, a skilled hunter. “She hunted with the eagerness of a Spaniard.” The image is powerful: A beautiful woman who hunted, rode on
horseback and marched with soldiers. She was in the same mold as Hippolyta and Penthesilea, the heroines of epic lore, or of the great enemy of Aeneas, Camilla, who Virgil describes as “leading her troop of riders and squadrons bright with bronze.”

Even Zenobia’s dress was described as Amazonian. The SHA says she held court wearing a helmet “girt with a purple fillet, which had gems hanging from the lower edge, while its center was fastened with the jewel called cochlis.” (This was a spiral gem considered precious in the East.) As noted before, headgear was a potent symbol in antiquity. The radiated crown borne by Aurelian on Syrian coins heralded his August status while Zenobia’s melon-shaped hairstyle evoked her descent from Cleopatra. In Rome, a laurel wreath was a sign of victory and a red cap denoted that a former slave was now a free man. A helmet was the insignia of a warrior – almost every depiction of Achilles in ancient Greek art shows him with his distinctive hatchet-like helmet which was instantly recognizable. In some versions of the Greek myth, he fell in love with Penthesilea only when he tore off her helmet and saw that she was a beautiful woman. In the many Greek depictions of Amazons battling Greeks, the warrior women are often shown either with helmets or with the caps that indicated that they were foreigners. They were not shown with the veils traditionally worn by Greek women in antiquity or even bare-headed as women were depicted in ancient
Roman art. Again, the Virgin goddess Athena, patroness of warriors, was also depicted wearing a helmet.

Therefore, the association between Zenobia and Amazons would have been clear to most people in antiquity. According to the historians, she was beautiful, but with masculine traits. She was a huntress, rode a horse as well as a man, marched with warriors and was, above all, extremely chaste. To top it all off, she wore a helmet – a symbol of a warrior woman in the mold of the goddess Athena. It’s not known if this was an accurate portrayal of an historic figure. But the association created by Aurelian’s sympathetic biographers would have worked in the emperor’s favor, and may have been part of his propaganda to manipulate the image of Zenobia into a despised but worthy opponent.

It’s true that not all Romans regarded women warriors in a positive light - Juvenal heaps abuse upon women who engage in combat. “What modesty can you expect in a woman who wears a helmet, abjures her own sex, and delights in feats of strength?” But in general it would seem Amazons were widely admired for their strength and skill in battle as well as for their virtue. Homer, as noted, spoke of them as being on par with men, perhaps the greatest compliment a man could bestow on a woman in antiquity. The Greek historian Diodorus Siculus called them brave and great-hearted and in Greek myth they usually are depicted as behaving with honor, in comparison to sexually active
women who are cunning and duplicitous. Many Romans too would have likely viewed Amazons in a more positive light.

Perhaps these chaste warriors were admired just as much as promiscuous women were despised. This is especially evident in a poem by Propertius, the Latin poet who lived during the time of Augustus and was a colleague of the great Virgil. In one of his elegies he describes Penthesilea in glowing terms, an Amazon who “dared to attack the Danaan with arrows fired from horseback: she whose bright beauty conquered the conquering hero, when the golden helmet laid bare her forehead.”

Like many Roman poets, Propertius cannot resist drawing comparisons between powerful women of antiquity and powerful women of their day. Just a few lines after describing Penthesilea as beautiful and noble, he presents as a contrast the sexually voracious Cleopatra, “a woman worn out by her own attendants.” Cleopatra, the “whore queen,” and her “disgraced husband” Antony, dared to oppose Jupiter, the patron of Rome. The city was “terrified of a woman’s power and fearful of her threats,” but Augustus saved the day and vanquished the enemy. In this lengthy passage, Cleopatra is banished to the “frightened Nile” where she dies babbling and besotted with wine. In many ways, Propertius sums up the opposing views of powerful women. Chaste Amazonian warriors are noble. Promiscuous queens are despicable. The one dies gloriously on the field of battle while the latter kills herself in a drunken stupor.
For Aurelian, worried that his crucial victory over Zenobia would be regarded as a minor achievement, a link between the Syrian queen and mythic Amazons would be a public relations coup. By comparing her to Cleopatra, he was able to adopt the mantle of a new Augustus saving Rome from a foreign queen. By comparing her to mythic Amazons, he could also assume the role of a great hero on par with Hercules, Achilles and Aeneas. Aurelian and Zenobia never engaged in actual combat. In fact, there’s no evidence that Zenobia ever took to the battlefield at all. But by accentuating her Amazonian qualities, Aurelian may have been able to surround her with the glamorous aura of a mythic woman warrior, even a goddess. And as stated earlier, a key component of that manipulation of her image was to emphasize her chastity, in marked contrast to that of Cleopatra and Helen.

Aurelian’s magnificent triumph was perhaps his greatest piece of propaganda and was likely carefully staged for maximum affect. The SHA records that Zenobia, perhaps in her jewelled helmet, was carried through the streets of Rome in one of her chariots, not in a cart. She was a conquered warrior in a vehicle of war, not carted through the streets like a woman on her way to the baths. And most remarkable of all, she was not the only female that Aurelian was proud to have conquered that memorable day. Marching along the route, amid the representatives from all of the other rebels that Aurelian had subdued, was a
small group of note. According to the SHA, “There were led along also ten
women, who, fighting in male attire, had been captured among the Goths after
many others had fallen; these a placard declared to be of the race of the
Amazon — for placards were borne before all, displaying the names of their
nations.” Aurelian seems to have been an emperor with a vested interest in
promoting the myth of powerful Amazons.

But in order for Aurelian propaganda to be effective, it also had to be
believable. While the SHA and other pro-Aurelian historians of antiquity
emphasized Zenobia’s heroic abilities in order to make her a worthy opponent,
they also played up her womanly shortcomings – her perceived indecision and
passivity. This was perhaps a way to make Zenobia more credible in the eyes of
their elite male audience who had strongly held assumptions about the character
of females. But once again, it could also have ultimately served Aurelian’s
interests to elevate the role of Palmyrene men in order to make his victory more
note-worthy.
CHAPTER IV
POLITICAL REALITIES OF THE EMPIRE

In the fall of 274 A.D. Zenobia was in desperate straits. Her once sizable kingdom had crumbled within a matter of months. Her army had been routed twice by Aurelian’s legions and forced to retreat. Cities she had taken either by force or by treaty were now back within the fold of the Roman Empire. Some had been conquered by Aurelian while others had quickly capitulated to the winning side. Now the once-mighty queen was holed up in her stronghold of Palmyra under siege. Even the reinforcements she had been counting on from the East had proven a disappointment. Aurelian had brought them over to his side, as the SHA put it, “some by forcible means and some by cunning.”  

The rich mercantile population of Palmyra had had enough. Zosimus says they called a council and decided that the best course of action was for Zenobia to leave the city and head East to Persia for help, a curious plan given that the expected Persian reinforcements had already defected to Aurelian. But, “having thus determined, they set Zenobia on a female camel ... and conveyed her out of the city.”  

The historian doesn’t say whether the queen concurred with this ultimately-doomed plan of action, or whether she was ignominiously slung on the back of the camel like a sack of goods. But in the passage, she seems to be
regarded as little more than an object. “They set Zenobia on a female camel.” A female camel, Zosimus notes, was the swiftest conveyance available. Not only did they want her out of the city, but they wanted her out as speedily as possible. This excellent horsewoman didn’t mount or ride the camel. She was simply put on its back by others. The imagery is telling in that throughout the Roman historical narratives, Zenobia is frequently portrayed as a curiously passive figure.

Earlier in his history, Zosimus recounted a similar scene. Zenobia and her general Labdas had been soundly routed by Aurelian on a battlefield near the key city of Antioch, which had sided with Zenobia. Zosimus says that the general feared that the citizens of Antioch would turn on them if they heard of the defeat - so he came up with a clever plan to trick the city into believing that Zenobia’s forces had won the battle. He found a man among his ranks who closely resembled Aurelian, dressed him the garb of a Roman emperor and had him led through the streets of Antioch as if he had been taken prisoner in defeat. “By this contrivance he imposed on the Antiochians, (Labdas) stole out of the city by night, and took with him Zenobia with the remainder of the army to Emisa.” Once again, Zenobia is not a decisive figure in the narrative. She seemed to have played no role in the plot to dupe the citizens into Antioch and escape. The general “took her with him.” Perhaps he even slung her over a camel.
There are several reasons why pro-Aurelian historians would have presented Zenobia in such a passive light after comparing her to the great queens of history and after praising her strength, fortitude, chastity and exceptional abilities. As suggested earlier, passages such as these and others - which will be examined later - were perhaps an attempt by historians to lend credibility to their portrait of Zenobia. Males in the ancient world, who made up the intended audience for these histories, were likely to have scoffed at the notion that a woman could be equal to a man. But I believe the historians were not being that nuanced when they portrayed Zenobia in a passive light. They were simply presenting yet another argument to bolster Aurelian’s claim that his victory over her was hard won and worthy of merit. Zenobia had not been the real foe faced by Aurelian. It had been the men who controlled her. By presenting this scenario, the historians were covering all bases.

They may have been following the example of Aurelian himself, if we are to believe the SHA. We’ve already noted the first of two letters purportedly wrote justifying his triumph over Zenobia. In it, he praises the queen effusively as an exemplary leader who “inspired such fear in the peoples of the East” that they never challenged her rule. But in the second letter included in the SHA, which is to a friend, he paints a far different picture in his quest for justification. “The Romans are saying that I am merely waging a war with a woman, just as if
Zenobia alone and with her own forces only were fighting against me, and yet, as a matter of fact, there is as great a force of the enemy as if I had to make war against a man, while she, because of her fear and her sense of guilt, is a much baser foe.”

To a modern reader, the two letters may seem contradictory. But Aurelian was likely conducting a multi-pronged propaganda campaign. By identifying Zenobia as exceptional on one hand, and as a pawn of men on the other, Aurelian would have been able to strengthen the perception that he was an exceptional leader doubly worthy of the mantle of Augustus.

Therefore, throughout the pro-Aurelian histories there is a repeated refrain that Zenobia was not acting alone and that it was, in fact, male generals and counselors who were the real force behind her successes. We’ve already noted two examples in Zosimus, the most credible of Aurelian’s biographers. When the historian first introduces Zenobia in his narrative, at the death of her husband, he notes that she had “the courage of a man” but then continues on the same line that “with the assistance of her husband’s friends, acted in every respect as he would have done.” In other words, even a courageous woman was lost without the support of men and, after all, she was simply following the path that her husband had already forged. Of course no leader, male or female, fights a war single handedly.
But throughout his history, Zosimus refers to Aurelian as a single entity while referring to Zenobia as part of a group. For instance he writes that Aurelian entered Antioch in triumph and encountered the citizens who had supported “the party of Zenobia,” rather than just the queen herself. Also, when he met the Palmyrene army on the field of battle, it’s noted that they vastly outnumbered the Roman legions. Granted, it’s common in Roman histories for a victorious Roman general to defeat a larger foe through sheer cunning and bravery. In this vein, the accounts of Aurelian’s victories are not exception. But it is worth noting that in Zosimus descriptions of the ensuing battles, Zenobia is never mentioned – likely because she wasn’t present but also to underscore that the actual fighting was between men on a battlefield, not an inequitable struggle between a male and a female.

Zosimus has a lengthy account of the battle outside of Emisa in which he repeatedly refers to Zenobia’s army as ‘the Palmyrenes’ while referring to the Roman army as Aurelian’s forces. According to the historian, the Palmyrenes, consisting of more than 70,000 men, were vastly superior in numbers to the Romans and “were better horsemen.” It was a hard fought battle an Aurelian won through his superiority as a general. After his victory, the triumphant Romans marched toward Palmyra to crush the rebellion once and for all.

In his historical account, Zenobia was not on the battlefields, and seemingly
not in charge. She needed constant guidance from her ‘party’ of supporters. Zosimus says that she was “not a little disturbed” upon hearing of the defeat at Emisai and “therefore consulted with her (male) friends.” It is a constant refrain. Zenobia needed advice, counsel and direction. She was nominally the leader of the Palmyrenes, the regent of her son, the face on the coins. But men were in charge. Zosimus even names the Palmyrene noble Apsicus as “the principal author” of the rebellion. Lending credence to this charge, Apsicus went on to stage a second rebellion after Zenobia’s capture, as if the defeat of the queen was of little consequence to the Palmyrene men who were Aurelian’s ultimate foes.

The contention that Zenobia was ruled by men was made abundantly clear after her capture when Aurelian brought the queen “and her accomplices” to trial. The gig was up and the same queen that Zosimus earlier praised as having the “courage of a man” was now arguing that she was a mere female who was unable to make her own decisions. “Zenobia coming into court pleaded strongly in excuse of herself, and produced many persons, who had seduced her as a simple woman.”

The ‘simple woman’s’ life was spared, but many of the unfortunate men who counseled her were sentenced to death, including the historian Longinus. His fellow historian Zosimus, perhaps understandably, found this particularly tragic –
a man “whose writings are highly beneficial to all lovers of learning .... Longinus suffered upon the accusation of Zenobia.” According to Zosimus, Aurelian returned to Rome “carrying with him Zenobia” (on a camel?). She is, one more time, a passive object in transport.

The SHA too, which marveled at length over Zenobia’s abilities as a leader, an equestrian and a scholar, also adopted the argument that she was a figurehead for ambitious men, acknowledging that the idea of a woman emperor was just cause for “merriment and jests.”

As did Zosimus, the SHA places Zenobia in a more passive role and emphasizes that she was not acting alone during her brief reign as queen of the Eastern Empire. The histories state that at the battle of Emisa, Aurelian encountered not only Zenobia but also Zaba, (also known as Labdas) “her ally.” After the emperor’s victory “Zenobia and Zaba were put to flight.” It’s not just the queen he routed, but, just as importantly, her talented general. The SHA also emphasizes the dangers faced by Aurelian not from Zenobia, but from the men he encountered on the battlefield. While chasing after the queen to her stronghold of Palmyra, he was met by hostile Syrian brigands “and after suffering many mishaps he incurred great danger during the siege, being even wounded by an arrow.”

In his second letter recorded by the SHA, Aurelian recounts the difficulties he
faced when he reached the gates of the Syrian city. “It cannot be told what a store of arrows is here, what great preparations for war, what a store of spears and of stones; there is no section of the wall that is not held by two or three engines of war, and their machines can even hurl fire.” It was, according to the Emperor in this version of history, an almost insurmountable siege.

In this version of Aurelian’s history, he overcame the great perils of a dangerous male enemy. Zenobia herself ‘reminds’ Aurelian, and the readers of the SHA, that she was part of a larger coalition. In her purported letter to the Emperor she wrote, “On our side are the Saracens, on our side, too, the Armenians,” and she spoke of the Persian forces that she believed had promised to help her cause.

Also like Zosimus, the SHA notes that while Zenobia’s life was spared in defeat, Aurelian condemned many of the men who had advised her, including, as previously noted, the philosopher Longinus. “Aurelian is said to have slain him because he was told that that over-proud letter of hers had been dictated in accord with his counsel, although, in fact, it was composed in the Syrian tongue.” The implication perhaps is that Zenobia blamed Longinus, a Greek, for an ill-advised letter that she may have written herself.

In Aurelian’s letter to a friend he sums up Zenobia dismissively. “Why say more? She fears like a woman, and fights as one who fears punishment.”
Zenobia was fighting as a woman, not as a man. She was indecisive and helpless without men, and then blamed everyone but herself in defeat. But it didn’t matter, because there were plenty of able, trained and dangerous men fighting for the Palmyrene cause. By defeating them, Aurelian was earning his much coveted triumph.

The premise that Aurelian fought men, and not a woman, was persuasive enough to be handed down over the centuries and repeated by later historians. Zonaras, writing in the 12th century, called Aurelian “very skilled in military matters,” saying the emperor “subdued the inhabitants of Palmyra and crushed their Queen Zenobia.”\textsuperscript{14} The people he crushed were the same inhabitants who gathered during Aurelian’s siege and decided collectively to set Zenobia on a camel. In other words, it was the men who mattered.

The depiction of Zenobia as weak and passive would also have served to bolster Aurelian’s own reputation as a strong and decisive leader by comparison. This is a popular conceit that has been used by historians through the ages regardless of their subjects’ gender – make the victor look good by making the vanquished look bad. Ancient historians are generally effusive in their praise of Aurelian, who was widely regarded as restoring order during his brief reign and helping bring the ‘Crisis of the Third Century’ to a close.

The SHA for example is full of anecdotes illustrating the emperor’s
intelligence, bravery and mercy. “Many were the great and famous things that he said and did, but we cannot include them all in our book without causing a surfeit.” Zosimus, who describes Zenobia’s actions in such passive terms, deploys more forceful imagery for Aurelian. Zenobia was ‘set’ upon a camel, but Aurelian is described as a figure who acted decisively – “he defeated,” “he crossed,” “he slew.” Meanwhile the historian Orosius, who was born only a hundred years after the events, describes Aurelian as “a man who excelled as an energetic soldier.”

As for the hapless Zenobia, Orosius says she was defeated “by the fear of battle rather than by an actual battle.” The contrast is especially stark given that the passage on Aurelian is only a few lines long. For the historians, Zenobia may have been a worthy opponent on paper, but she crumbled when faced with the superior Roman general.

It therefore makes sense that Aurelian propaganda would benefit from having Zenobia portrayed as weak and indecisive. But I would also argue that by depicting Zenobia as a noble-but-flawed, figure, Aurelian’s camp was also achieving another objective; they were protecting the crucial ties between the Eastern and Western halves of the Roman Empire. The world of 274 A.D. was far different from the age of Cleopatra and the propaganda that worked so brilliantly for Augustus would not have been as effective for Aurelian. During the time of
Augustus, citizenship was reserved solely for Romans who lived within the confines of the city-state and Egypt was truly foreign territory. It was ruled by client kings, but they were still nominally autonomous. Therefore, Augustus could demonize Cleopatra without fear of backlash within the established confines of the Empire of his day. The only audience Augustus had to impress was the one in Rome, so he could afford to slander an Egyptian queen.

But Aurelian lived in a different world and was playing to an expanded audience. Zenobia herself was a Roman citizen and the daughter of a Roman citizen. By the time of her birth, to be ‘Roman’ no longer entailed being part of an elite group within the walls of a single city. Aurelian himself was born into an obscure family in Dacia, what is now modern Serbia, and his long military career kept him out of the city of Rome for much of his life. He followed a long line of emperors who were born outside of the city, many of whom also came from humble backgrounds.

At the same time, Syria had become an integral part of the Roman world. At one point Antioch was the third largest city in the whole of the Empire, after Alexandria and Rome itself. Three of Aurelian’s predecessors had been of Syrian birth, including Elagabalus, whose flamboyant disregard for Roman religion and mores sparked the third century’s Crisis some 50 years earlier. Elagabalus was succeeded by a cousin Alexander Severus, also a Syrian and the last of the
Severan dynasty. Marcus Julius Philippus, who was born outside of Damascus, was emperor between 244 and 249. Although a Roman citizen, he was known as Philip the Arab because his family may have come to Syria from Arabia. We've already discussed how Palmyra was an important entry point for caravans from the far East and played an vital role in keeping the Empire supplied with silk and other luxury goods. But Syria as a whole had also become increasingly important because of the rise of Christianity. The Apostle Paul was said to have been converted when he was struck blind on a trip to Damascus. He is credited with establishing Christianity's first organized church in Antioch, giving the city special prominence in the early Christian era. Zenobia meanwhile was the widow of a hero – the man who had defeated the Persians and made the Empire safe from incursions from the Far East.

So Aurelian had to tread carefully. Not only did he have to defeat Zenobia’s armies, but he also had to win public opinion in her domain if he wanted to completely unite the fractured Empire. We know from our sources that he was very cognizant of the need to placate Syrian sensibilities and to pay homage to the importance the region.

The histories relate several episodes where Aurelian displayed masterful sensitivity to the locals. Zosimus says that after his primary engagement in Syria, at Emisa, Aurelian pardoned the citizens of the wayward city and then
recognized to the local deities. After accepting their surrender, “Aurelian paid due respect to their holy things...” The SHA goes into more detail, saying that the first thing the emperor did when he entered Emisa as conqueror was make his way to the Temple of Elagabalus, “to pay his vows as if by a duty common to all.” This was certainly a public relations move given that his flamboyant predecessor had been widely condemned by much of the Roman world as a disaster. But the existence of a temple indicates he was still a popular figure in his home town, and Aurelian was tactful enough to recognize that fact. Not only did he pay his respects to Elagabalus, but he also established more temples in the city, “dedicating gifts of great value.” Clearly, Aurelian wanted to cement his hold on the newly recovered region by bolstering his popularity.

It was not unusual for Roman emperors to contend that local deities welcomed them as conquerors. According to Josephus, the Flavians created the belief that foreign gods acknowledged their superiority, and Aurelian seems to have followed in the same vein. Zosimus breaks from his history of Aurelian to relate a long and detailed account of divine Syrian acquiescence, a passage the historian himself describes as a serious digression. In it, he relates that the Palmyrenes were warned that their rebellion was doomed by several ‘declarations of the gods,’ including an oracle at a temple of an Asian version of Venus. Zosimus says the goddess rejected the gold, silk and other valuable items
which they threw in a giant cistern as an offering. Instead of sinking, the gifts floated away, thus showing the rebels that the gods did not support their plans to break away from the empire, according to Zosimus’ interpretation.

In contrast, Aurelian was favored not only by Syrian gods, but also by Syrian historical heroes. The SHA contains a remarkable, and lengthy, digression – this one concerning Aurelian’s victory over the rebel city of Tyana. At one point during the arduous siege, the irritable emperor had declared that “not a dog would be left alive” once the city was taken. But he was of cooler temperament once the city was in his hands, realizing that if he destroyed the city’s inhabitants, he would also likely destroy his hopes that other cities that had sided with Zenobia would capitulate to his side. So in order to fulfill his vow without suffering a backlash, he told his soldiers: “I did, indeed, declare that I would not leave a dog alive in this city; well then, kill all the dogs.”¹⁹ The SHA says the city was left intact - the only casualty was a rich citizen who had betrayed Tyana by showing Aurelian how to conquer the city. According to the SHA, Aurelian killed the traitor but left the man’s fortune to his heirs, so that no one could accuse the emperor “with having permitted a man who was rich to be slain for the sake of his money.” Again, Aurelian was consumed with appearances – not only how he appeared to the Roman Empire at large but also how he appeared to the Syrians he was in the midst of conquering.
But perhaps the most remarkable part of the SHA’s long passage on Tyana was the contention that he was supported by the city’s most famous historical figure, Apollonius of Tyana, a philosopher that the history describes as “of the greatest renown and authority” and “a true friend of the gods” who himself was regarded as semi-divine. The SHA says that the spirit of Apollonius appeared to Aurelian outside his tent during the siege of Tyana in support of the assault on his native city, urging the emperor to spare the inhabitants and treat them kindly. As we’ve seen, Aurelian honored the request in Tyana, in regards to the citizens if not the dogs, and then displayed similar leniency when he conquered Antioch. The SHA says that in deference to this same Apollonius, Aurelian built temples and filled them with treasures for the local populations.

Even in Palmyra, the heart of the rebellion, Aurelian displayed a similar regard for local deities, in what may have been a bid for widespread support of the unification of the Empire. Although he ordered Palmyra destroyed after its second rebellion, following the capture of Zenobia, he not only spared the main temple to the sun god Belos, but had it rebuilt and refurbished. The SHA quotes yet another letter, in which Aurelian states he wants the temple “restored ... to the condition it formerly was” with gold and silver from the Palmyrene coffers. He added, “thus to me and to the immortal gods you will do a most pleasing service.” 20
Further, Aurelian built another temple to Belus in Rome, which Zosimus says, “he ornamented with all the sacred spoils that he brought from Palmyra, placing in it the statues of the sun and Belus.” While identified with the Latin supreme deity Jupiter, Belus was a Semitic god, likely of Babylonian origin. By paying homage to Syrian religion he was proving not only his divine favor, but also his acquiescence to local beliefs.

If Aurelian was tactful enough to scurry to the temple of the dreadful Elagabalus, then he was likely tactful enough not to malign another of Syria’s favored citizens – Zenobia. He could mitigate his criticism of the rebellious queen by depicting her as a remarkable woman, an heir to Cleopatra, a chaste Amazonian fighter – who was unfortunately led astray by the very nature of her weaker sex.

Aurelian’s treatment of Zenobia following her capture would also indicate that he was dealing with a popular figure in his newly re-united empire. In his letter to the Senate, as recorded by the SHA, Aurelian explained that he did not want to execute his prisoner because “she did a great service to the Roman State” when she and her husband secured the Eastern part of the Empire during the crisis. He acknowledged that his predecessor the Emperor Claudius “wisely” allowed her to rule unchecked when he was preoccupied with his campaigns against the Goths.
Zenobia therefore was not a demon on the same order of Cleopatra, to be despised and scorned. She was a Roman citizen who had served the Empire during a crisis and who deserved a modicum of respect. Whole nations of Roman subjects had elected to follow her rule in the East. These same subjects would probably be disgruntled if their heroine was maligned, just as they would be angered if their gods were scorned. It seems Aurelian was astute enough to know that he could not hold the newly reunited Empire without paying homage to both.

As the SHA mentions on numerous occasions, Zenobia was a highlight of Aurelian’s breathtaking triumph along with the rebel Tetricus so that Aurelian could demonstrate his victory “over both the East and the West.” But afterwards the SHA says the wayward queen was allowed to retire with her children not far from the villa of Hadrian in an estate along the Tibur which “even to this day is still called Zenobia.” It’s telling that the SHA says she lived “in the manner of a Roman matron.” This unnatural female had assumed her natural and accepted role, as a proper and chaste Roman matron. Far from being another Cleopatra, she had become another Octavia, the paragon of female virtue in Augustan Rome. For the pro-Aurelian SHA, this would have been the perfect way to dispose of Aurelian’s most note-worthy foe. He had conquered her kingdom and put her in her proper place. Thanks to Aurelian, all was right with the world.
But I believe it’s fair to say Aurelian was not quite done with Zenobia yet. She was after all, his most famous foe – perhaps one of the most engaging and interesting figures of the 3rd century. For a man consumed with his image, it’s understandable that Aurelian would want to milk Zenobia for all that she was worth.

In her book *Cleopatra and Rome*, Diana Kleiner argues that Augustus admired Cleopatra for her larger-than-life persona and not only tried to emulate her in some respects, but also tried to imbue himself in her legendary aura. She writes, “On one hand, he mounted a devastating and successful propaganda war against her. On the other hand, he recognized that her celebrity could be useful to him as a foil for his own ambitions.” To that end, Augustus erected a statue of Cleopatra near his temple of Venus, had his name carved on her temple of Dendera in Egypt, and had a pair of her pearl earrings adorn yet another statue of Venus in Rome.

Acts like these suggests Augustus used Cleopatra’s image and accoutrements to underscore his mastery over and her kingdom,” Kleiner writes. Alexandria, after all, had been the center of the Hellenistic world, the foremost city of arts and learning. By conquering Alexandria and as its famed queen, Augustus was demonstrating that Rome was now the center of the known world and repository of all of the treasures, talent, beauty and learning that it contained.
We have already noted that Augustus wanted very badly to display Cleopatra in his triumph in Rome and had her carefully guarded after her capture. She was a major celebrity, a household name in an era long before the saturation of mass media. Her presence would have made an already notable pageant truly epic in scope; a scene that could be recalled down through the ages. Alas for Augustus, the queen’s suicide prevented this anticipated spectacle. Instead he had to make due with a wax effigy clutching an asp – a visual explanation to the disappointed masses as to the absence of the real deal.

But this effigy wasn’t the only image of Cleopatra that Augustus displayed to the populace. He allowed statues of her to remain standing throughout the Empire, defying the conventional practice of tearing down monuments of the vanquished. Why would he allow such honors to a woman against whom he had successfully waged such a devastating public relations campaign? Plutarch suggests that he was bribed by a friend of the late queen’s, who paid him two thousand talents to leave the statues intact. But Kleiner suggests that visual reminders of the renowned Cleopatra served Augustus’ purpose as well. “Perhaps to remind him and Rome that if she was great, he was greater still.”

Kleiner says that perhaps also to that end Augustus transported Egyptian obelisks to Rome, with great difficulty and expense, and had them erected in the most prominent spots in the city. At the same time, Egyptian art and architecture
flourished in the Roman world and became a common motif in Roman homes. Perhaps one of the most notable examples is the pyramid-shaped tomb of Caius Cestius, who lived during the time of Augustus, which still stands in Rome to this day. Meanwhile, the worship of the Egyptian goddess Isis, which was widespread in Rome earlier, spiked in popularity around the time of Cleopatra. According to Kleiner, having conquered Egypt, Rome wanted to possess not only the physical place, but its essence as well.  

Once again, there are marked similarities between the actions of Augustus in regards to Cleopatra and Aurelian in regards to Zenobia. Like his revered predecessor, Aurelian too seemed to want to capitalize on his female foe’s fame and mystique, and appropriate some of her beauty, aura and, certainly, riches for his own use.

The SHA tells us that after Zenobia’s capture, Aurelian’s soldiers demanded that she be turned over to them for punishment. But the wily emperor refused – “the woman he saved for his triumph, wishing to show her to the eyes of the Roman people.” The men who had “advised her to begin and prepare and wage the war” he immediately put to death. It’s telling that although Aurelian was worried that Romans would perceive Zenobia as an unworthy opponent, he wanted to show her in triumph rather than the men he actually battled. We’ve discussed before the lengthy descriptions of the triumphal celebrations found in
several books of the SHA. The history breathlessly recounts Zenobia’s fabulous jewels, the chains of gold so heavy that she had a buffoon to help carry them, the trio of magnificent chariots that had belonged to her royal family. This is not the accouterments of a vanquished warrior. There’s no mention of Zenobia’s helmet, no suggestion of armor or weaponry.

It would seem Zenobia was presented not so much as a captured enemy combatant as she was presented as a glamorous star with all of the trappings. Palmyra, after all, had been a fabulously prosperous mercantile center at the crossroads of East and West, while Rome had just suffered through fifty years of crippling conflict, fearsome invasions and constant upheaval. To struggling Romans, Zenobia would have been a living icon of wealth and beauty, fame and mystique. She was the heir of the fabled Cleopatra, linked to Dido, a fascinating freak of nature along the lines of the great Amazonians who had battled history’s most revered heroes. Here she was carted before them, a noted beauty, dripping in gold and riding in a fabulous chariot, her many crowns held aloft for all to see. It’s no wonder that she cut such an admirable figure.

Aurelian was taking full advantage of the spectacle that had been denied Augustus. By presenting Zenobia in such an ostentatious display he was basking in her reflected glamour and emphasizing his mastery over the East. As we’ve noted before Aurelian appeared to be concerned over appearances, perhaps
obsessively so. The SHA says that when the Senate voted him the cognomen Carpicus after a victory he sniffed that it was ignoble because the name sounded too similar to a word for ‘boot.’ This proud, image-conscious man would have conceivably crafted his triumph for full affect and Zenobia’s central role would have been carefully stage-managed. The SHA describes Aurelian at this epoch as “victorious and in possession of the entire East, more proud and insolent now that he held Zenobia in chains.”

The temple to Belus in Rome would have been another opportunity for Aurelian to advertise his achievements, by publicly displaying the vast treasures of Zenobia and her luxurious Palmyrene empire. Zosimus calls the Temple of the Sun “sumptuous.” It was “ornamented with all the sacred spoils that he (Aurelian) brought from Palmyra” and contained the statue of Belus that had been taken from the massive temple that dominated the conquered city. The SHA notes that the temple also contained fabulous garments “encrusted with jewels” which were also spoils of the war. They were Persian in origin but it’s fair to speculate they may have been worn by Zenobia after she and her husband subdued the Persians and saved the eastern end of the Empire. Aurelian seemed particularly intrigued by these royal garments. The SHA says that some of the garments were of such an intense purple hue that Aurelian unsuccessfully searched for the source of the dye. Perhaps Aurelian wanted to wrap himself
in this brilliant manifestation of Zenobia’s glory – the purple robes of Eastern royalty.

After being led in triumph through the streets of Rome, foreign enemies were traditionally strangled, having served their purpose. But according to ancient sources, Zenobia was allowed to live – likely because she was a woman and also because, as a citizen of Rome, execution was proscribed by law. But she may also have continued to be of use to Aurelian as a dazzling reminder of his success. Zonaras says that, according to some sources, she married a distinguished Roman and that her daughters were betrothed to other high-ranking nobles. There is later evidence of Romans who claimed they were her descendants.³⁰

But intriguingly, Zonaras, in his brief biography of Aurelian, further claims that the emperor himself married one of Zenobia’s daughters. If true, the marriage might simply have been a strategy to cement his acceptance as ruler in the newly re-acquired eastern third of the Empire. But given his apparent preoccupation with Zenobia, it may also have been a way to appropriate some of her glamorous heritage to buff up his own credentials. This son of a Dacian nobody would have been allying himself with an ancient and distinguished family with a pedigree that stretched back through the ages. No other historical source mentions such a marriage. But it’s fascinating to think that had Aurelian lived and
produced an heir, then the Empire could have ultimately been ruled by a
descendant from the same Cleopatra who had fascinated and repulsed Romans
for generations.
CONCLUSION

Zenobia was one of Rome’s most noteworthy enemies of the late classical period, in part because she wrested away a third of the Empire but mostly because she was a rarity in antiquity – a female leader in a time of war. Her conqueror, Aurelian, was a successful leader who historians note was markedly self-conscious about his public image. Through the lens of ancient, pro-Aurelian historians, we can logically speculate how Aurelian may have managed Rome’s perception of Zenobia in order to enhance his own prestige.

By emphasizing the links between Zenobia and her ancestor Cleopatra, Aurelian would have been able to adopt the mantle of the venerated Augustus while tapping into a long-standing hatred of meddlesome Eastern queens in order to win Roman support for his cause. By emphasizing her chastity and warrior-like qualities as well, the Roman emperor could also give Zenobia the aura of an Amazonian, thus putting his conflict with her on an epic scale.

In creating a Zenobia of almost mythic proportions, Aurelian could justify that his victory against a woman was deserving of merit. But in order to ensure that Romans took his victory seriously, he likely also emphasized that the actual battles involved well-armed men who outnumbered his own forces, and that Zenobia was advised by skillful male generals and renowned male philosophers. The contention was that despite her amazing abilities, she was ultimately a pawn
of more worthy males.

Given the political realities of the Empire in the 3rd Century, it seems unlikely that Aurelian would have tried to demonize Zenobia in the same way that Augustus waged a propaganda war against her ancestor Cleopatra. The Syrian queen was a Roman citizen in a fully-integrated part of the Empire, that had already seen several native sons achieve the ultimate rank of emperor. In order to successfully unite the fractured realm, Aurelian would have needed to be sensitive to Syrian pride and the popularity that Zenobia had enjoyed as ruler. It is for this reason that he may have opted to save her life and, according to some sources, allowed her to retire to a villa outside of Rome and remarry.

Finally, Aurelian’s massive and spectacular triumph suggests the image-conscious emperor may have tried to bask in the celebrity Zenobia engendered as a fabulously wealthy and beautiful descendant of famous royalty. By displaying Zenobia in all of her finery and gold, Aurelian would have advertised his own superiority as her conqueror, the man who now possessed all that she had owned. This wish to cement his association with Zenobia may even have extended to a marriage with her daughter.

It is for these myriad of reasons that Zenobia has come down to us through Roman historical lens as a complex figure during a tumultuous age. Although a mirror image in many ways to Cleopatra, she was never subject to the same
scathing propaganda painting her as a despicable harlot. Instead, Zenobia’s image may have been carefully managed to depict her as a worthy foe to an exceptional emperor who, while worried about how posterity viewed his triumph over a woman, was nonetheless eager to bask in her reflected celebrity as a female warrior queen.
NOTES

CHAPTER I

1 Commodus conducted a major triumph in 180 after subduing northern tribes.


4 Richard Stoneman, Palmyra and Its Empire: Zenobia's Revolt Against Rome (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995). 28. He bases his assessment on the claim that all of the inhabitants of the city, alerted to Antony's plan, were able to quickly gather up their treasure, suggesting they were few in number. But others have pointed out that the city must have already been rich if Antony thought it worth sacking.


6 The author visited the communities to produce a CNN broadcast in 1992.

7 Watson, Aurelian and the Third Century, 72.

8 Zosimus, Historia Nova, book I. He relates that Shapur stepped on the prostrate emperor's back in order to mount his horse and then kept him in servitude until his premature death.

9 SHA, 107.

10 The SHA identifies them inconsistently as Herennianus and Timolaus. It is difficult to reconcile these names with other historical works and archeological evidence which indicate that only one son, Vaballathus, was Odaenathus' eventual heir.


12 Ibid., 82. While hunting with the king, the nephew killed beasts before the king had a chance to do so - a terrible breach of etiquette that led to his brief imprisonment. When he was released, the nephew killed the king and Herodes with a sword during a family dinner.

13 Watson, Aurelian and the Third Century, 45.


**CHAPTER II**


2 *SHA*, 137.


4 *SHA*, 136.


10 *SHA*, 149.

11 *SHA*, 141.

12 *SHA*, 311.
CHAPTER III


3 Ibid., 16.


6 Lucan, *Civil War*, 135.


10 Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, 42:34.

11 Ibid., 50:24-8.


15 Tyldesley, *Cleopatra: Last Queen of Egypt*, 175.


24 Lucan, *Civil War*, 135.


**CHAPTER IV**

1 *SHA*, 235.


3 Ibid.

4 *SHA*, 205.

5 *SHA*, 247.


7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.
9 *SHA*, 146.

10 Ibid., 246.

11 Ibid., 247.

12 Ibid., 246.

13 Ibid., 311.

14 Zonaras, *The History of Zonaras: From Alexandra Severus to the Death of Theodosius the Great*, book XXVII.

15 *SHA*, 239.


17 *SHA*, 245.


19 *SHA*, 241.

20 Ibid., 257.

21 Ibid., 341.

22 Ibid., 142.


26 Ibid., 126.

27 *SHA*, 142.


29 *SHA*, 203.

30 Zonaras says there were so-called descendants during his era, almost 1,000 years after Zenobia’s death.
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