

The Legend of Zenobia: Memorializing a Warrior Queen

After building her power through political alliances, strategic expansion, and propagandistic campaigns, Zenobia led a revolution that had the potential to dismantle Roman supremacy. Between 270-272 CE, the Queen of Palmyra carved out an internal empire within Roman territory, annexed Egypt, and assumed imperial titles for herself and her son. This paper's goal is to analyze the way that representations of Zenobia were used to etch power dynamics into the collective memory both during her reign and in the years following. Was Zenobia forgotten, overwritten, idealized, or characterized in a specific way? If so, what were the gendered motivations behind this process? What can archaeological evidence add to the conversation?

In terms of the developing field of memory studies, these questions haven't been widely addressed by scholars. Furthermore, in the scholarship on gender in the ancient Mediterranean, the focus on women outside of Greece and Rome is also relatively recent. As such, this paper attempts to shift attention away from the well-known narrative presented by Roman sources towards a more holistic view of the process of memorializing Zenobia. This study will not only add a new tenet to the analysis of Zenobia's power as a warrior queen, but it will also reinterpret her modern legacy as a culmination of deliberate memorialization and idealization tactics.

Zenobia's legend was formulated through three major narrative phases: her own self-representation as a divine, motherly, rightful ruler, the subsequent Roman view of her as a formidable warrior queen, and the Eastern conception of her as a female tribal chief. The archaeological evidence primarily offers information on Zenobia's legacy as it was presented during her own reign. Although the archaeological record is incomplete, coins show how she

identified herself through recognizable Syrian and Egyptian icons, and milestone markers indicate her family as militaristic, legitimate successors (Southern 2008: 109). Moreover, by portraying herself in certain dress and patronizing building projects, she took on the mantle of a divine leader with special heritage. In Zosimus' *Historia Nova* and the *Historia Augusta*, the authors attempt to reassert Roman preeminence by making the defeated warrior queen out to be unnervingly intelligent, masculine, larger than life, and femininely flawed. In addition to their manipulative representations, the memories of Zenobia were shared in the Eastern Mediterranean and revived by later generations to reflect the values of their local region. In the 10th century, the Arabic story of Zenobia as Al-Zabbā presents a picture of a cunning female chief embedded in tribal warfare (Woltering 2014: 28).

After analyzing the evidence for each tradition, this paper argues that the most invariable aspect of Zenobia's legend as a warrior queen is the way that she navigates cultural conflicts through her strategic representation of womanly power, particularly emphasizing motherhood and legitimate royal succession. Even today, the story of Zenobia resonates with women and minority groups as they utilize similar approaches to fight against oppressive systems analogous to the controlling Roman Empire. Because of the ancient collective memories borne over time and space, her legend as a warrior queen continues to grow.

Preliminary Bibliography

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