

ZENOBIA IN NUMMIS

Arjan Senden

“The Romans scorn the war that I wage against a woman. They are neither familiar with the character, nor with the power of Zenobia”. (*Aurelian addressing the senate of Rome*)

In the year 272, the Roman Emperor Aurelian launched a lightning offensive against the rebellious city-state of Palmyra (also known as “Tadmur”) and its rulers: queen Zenobia and her son Vabalathus¹. In previous years, both Emperor Gallienus (253-268) and his successor Claudius II (268-270) had tolerated Zenobia’s independence, allowing her to annex large stretches in the eastern part of the Empire, including Egypt. In addition, several cities in Asia Minor, including the wealthy city of Antioch, had joined the Palmyrene state, which rapidly developed into an Empire, rather than a peripheral trading town. The rise and fall of Palmyra is to some extent reflected in contemporary coinage. Coins struck during the reign of Zenobia and her son Vabalathus, especially, reflect the changing political realities of their time, with the face of the Roman Emperor—initially on the obverse of the coin—gradually being replaced by that of Vabalathus. In addition, the title of ‘Augustus’, normally restricted to the highest office in the Roman world, was bestowed to the lord of Palmyra—a direct challenge to the legitimacy of Roman rule. In this article, the gradual stylistic changes in Palmyrene numismatics is examined in the light of the political upheaval of the second half of the 3rd century AD.

Preamble

The year 260 represents a dark period of Roman history. Whilst on campaign in the east, the Roman Emperor Valerian is defeated, captured and eventually executed by the Sassanid ruler Shapur I. These events were the cause of great

¹ Vabalathus (“Vaballathus or Wahaballât”): whilst Greco-Roman sources usually refer to “Vaballathus”, Greco-Roman coins usually spell Vabalathus (with a single ‘l’). In concordance with “Roman Imperial Coinage of the British Museum”, I use “Vabalathus” in this article.

domestic upheaval in Rome, with Valerian's surviving son Gallienus, and Valerian's grandsons Valerian Junior and Salonius failing to restore order to the Empire (See for recent surveys of the notion of crisis in the third century empire, Burgersdijk 2007, John 2006 and 2008; and especially De Blois 2006). The ensuing chaos allowed for the rise of a number of rebellions and usurpers, including the generals Postumus (ruler of the so-called Gallic Empire, 259-273), Ingenus and Regalianus (in Pannonia, in 260), and Macrianus Senior, Macrianus Junior and Quietus in Syria (260-1). Both of the Macriani were eventually defeated and consequently executed by Aereolus, whereas Quietus was besieged in Emesa by Odaenathos of Palmyra, an ally of Rome. With the death of Quietus at the hands of the citizens of Emessa, Odaenathos was rewarded the honorary title *Corrector Totius Orientis* ("Restorer of the Entire Orient") by a grateful Roman senate. It was this title that would, in later years, serve to legitimize the ascend of Palmyra as a veritable Empire of its own (Stoneman 1992). Initially though, Palmyra served as a convenient buffer state between the Roman Empire and the Sassanid Empire (Watson 1999).

Zenobia; a new Cleopatra or a devious Agrippina?

In the year 267, Odaenathos and his son (from his first marriage) Herodianus died under suspicious circumstances. Historical sources do not provide us with a clear picture, but it appears that the Roman Emperor Gallienus at least held Septimia Zenobia, second wife of Odaenathos, responsible for the latter's death. His intentions to bring Palmyra firmly back in the Roman fold are, however, thwarted by the rebellion of one of his generals, Aureolus. Whilst besieging Aureolus at Milan, the Emperor is murdered by his own staff officers, amongst whom are the future Emperors Claudius II and Aurelian.

In 268, Zenobia seizes power and grants her son Vabalathus the title *Rex Regum*—a move which has been compared with the rise of two other famous women in Antiquity, Cleopatra VII (69-31 BC) and Agrippina Junior (15-59 AD), both of whom sought to establish their own dynasty (see for the equation with Zenobia: Stoneman 1995, 112; Watson 1999, 81; Potter 2004, 267; Southern 2008, 1-2). Three years later, Zenobia adopted a title herself: *Augusta*. There can be no doubt that this title was chosen with care, since *Augusta* was the official title of the Roman Emperor's wife (i.e. the Empress) and had not been in use since the death of Salonina, the wife of Gallienus (who was also murdered in 267). As a consequence and paradoxically, the adoption of this very Roman title was a clear political statement of Palmyrene independence.

Although not reflected in contemporary coins, Zenobia's important step of assuming the title *Augusta* is reflected in coins of a slightly later date, the so-called Antoniniani, which were minted at Antioch². The crude style of minting

² Coins with the original weight of a double Denarius (2,5 – 5 gr.). Introduced by aracalla

seems to reflect the actions of Aurelian in the east, in 272, when Zenobia was already retreating as a result of increased Roman pressure.

It is unclear which reasons lay behind Zenobia's decision to usurp such a loaded Roman imperial title: to the modern eye, Roman retaliation would have been inevitable. Various explanations may be entertained: Zenobia may have intended to use her new title to convince Aurelian to accept Palmyrene power, and perhaps to charm him into jointly ruling the Roman world—again a parallel to Cleopatra (cf. Sueton's "Augustus", 16-7)! Regardless of these considerations, Aurelian decided otherwise. After restoring order elsewhere in the Empire, Aurelian marched his troops to Palmyra. The city fell after a difficult siege in 272 and Zenobia and her son Vabalathus were captured. They were paraded in the Triumph procession of Aurelian in 274, after which they essentially disappear from the historical record. With the suppression of Palmyrene independence, the 'crisis' of the 3rd century, as it is often described, draws towards an end.

Zenobia in Nummis

Coins of Zenobia are rare. With Zenobia's failure to achieve independency, her coins were generally recast. Only a total of about 10 to 15 'Antoniniani', minted on the command of the Palmyrene Queen, are known. They are scattered over several museums throughout Europe (in London, Oxford, Munich and Paris) as well as private collections (i.a. Tanini and Gnecci, in Italy). Three royal mints are known to have minted Zenobia's coins: those at Antioch, Alexandria and Emesa (Ehling 2008, 848). We will turn to these royal mints below.

Antioch

During the 3rd century AD, the mint at Antioch mostly produced bronze coins, such as the Antoniniani. Several 'workshops', or *Officina*, are known to have been active in Antioch during the 3rd century AD: A(1st), B(2nd), G(3rd), D(4th), E(5th), S(6th), Z(7th), H(8th) and the Q(9th)³. Normally, their symbol was visible on the reverse of the coin, below the coin's main design / message (cf. Mattingly 1998). The take-over of Zenobia at Antioch is evidenced by the sudden appearance of Zenobia's profile—watching to the right—on the obverse of the Antoniniani, along with the line S ZENOBIA AUG. The reverse shows a depiction of the goddess Juno, alongside a peacock and the line JUNO REGI-

in 215 AD. The monetary reform of Aurelian in 274 caused a name change to 'Aurelianini'. Cf. Mattingly 1998.

³ A recently discovered bronze coin, very similar in composition to the Antoniniani but as yet not described in numismatic handbooks, may point to the existence of yet another workshop—perhaps not even at Antioch, since stylistic considerations suggest a workshop at Sidon, Tyre or Akko. The coin is heavily worn, making it difficult to identify its provenance, but these three cities are the only centres in the region using Latin, rather than Greek, for their coinage, and therefore would be plausible candidates for a minting atelier.

NA. Some variation is known. A unique coin from the Tanini collection shows a similar obverse (ZENOBIA AUG) but with the line PIETAS AUGG on the reverse. The 'AUGG' is a reference to the two Augusti: Zenobia and Vabalathus.

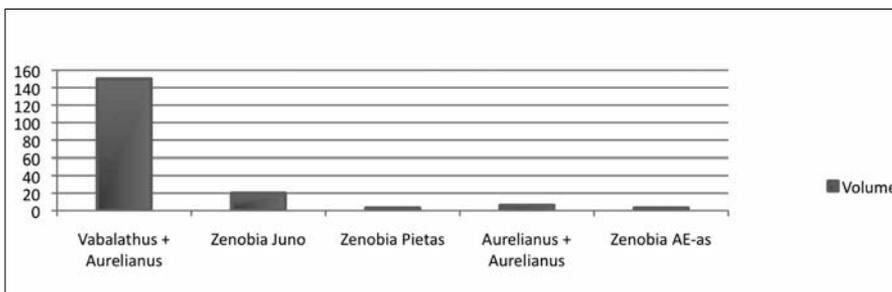


Fig. 1. Frequency of the (known) different types of Antoniniani/AE-as.

In 272, the Antioch mint produced yet another type of coin, this time showing two rulers. On the obverse, the Roman Emperor Aurelian is depicted, with the line IMP C AURELIANUS AUG. On the reverse Vabalathus is shown, with his own distinctive set of titles: VABALATHUS V C R IM D R—Vir Clarissimus Rex IMperator Dux Romanorum. At first glance, there can be no doubt that Aurelian, with his superior title of Augustus, is acknowledged as the most senior of the two rulers. Below Aurelian's portrait, however, is the mark of the 3rd workshop of the Antioch mint: workshop marks were normally reserved for the reverse of coins—not the obverse. It appears unlikely that this is just a coincidence: coins like these were clearly meant to stress Zenobia's and Vabalathus' political agenda of pursuing Palmyrene independence and parity with Rome.

There are several other examples where one can follow the gradual assumption of Imperial titles. Such is the case with the coin from the Tanini collection, where there appears to be a clear connection between the title Augustus and the Palmyrene court. A similar development can be traced on the Antoniniani. I have already mentioned the coins with the titles VABALATHUS V C R IM D R on the obverse and IMP C AURELIANUS AUG on the reverse. A number of coins from the Antioch mint, however, only bear the text IMP C AURELIANUS AUG on both the obverse and the reverse of the coins, whilst retaining the portraits of both Aurelian and Vabalathus. Again, this is unlikely to have been a mistake, but should rather be seen as an attempt to link the highest Roman Imperial title to the Palmyrene ruler Vabalathus (whilst at the same time acknowledging Aurelian as the rightful Roman Emperor).

Alexandria

At the peak of her power, Zenobia even controlled the wealthy province of

Egypt and its metropolis, Alexandria. True to its origins, the Alexandrine mint did not produce Antoniniani like the mint of Antioch, but so-called Tetradrachmes. Stylistically, the Alexandrine coins are easily distinguishable from coins from Antioch—the general execution is cruder and the text is exclusively written in Greek. Though Tetradrachmes originally had been of silver, their value had dropped significantly over the course of the centuries: Zenobia's Tetradrachmes were of bronze, and minted in the short period 271-272. The Alexandrine workshops also refer to the ruling monarch reigning year (ETOYΣ or ETOUC; cf. Vagi 1999), as opposed to the 'timeless' design of the Antoniniani. Like the mint in Antioch, the Alexandrine mint was also experimenting with double portraits on coins. The first issue of Tetradrachmes struck under Palmyrene rule bears a close resemblance to the 'standard' Antoniniani mentioned above, with the appropriate set of titles for both the Roman Emperor (on the obverse) and the Palmyrene ruler (on the reverse). A later variant, however, shows both rulers facing each other on the obverse—a clear manifestation of parity. The regnal year is stamped on the reverse; the titles of both rulers are difficult to read.

Emessa (?)

A number of Antoniniani, thought to have been struck at Emessa⁴, show the next step in the assumption of Imperial titles by Vabalathus. The text on the obverse of the coin reads IM C VHABALTHUS AUG. Though it is remarkable that Vabalathus' name has been misspelled, the use of the title Augustus to Vabalathus without reference to the Roman Emperor Justinian is even more striking. This type of coin, then, can be seen as a symbol both of the might of Palmyra by the end of the 3rd century AD and of the *hubris* that caused the collapse of the Palmyrene Empire. The usurpation of the title Augustus appears to have been the final straw for Aurelian. Only months after this coin was struck Vabalathus and his mother Zenobia were paraded through the streets of Rome.

Aftermath

Ulpi Severina, Aurelian's wife was awarded the title Augusta after her husband's triumph in 274 AD—the very title that Zenobia had usurped only 6 years

⁴ The coin types with officina symbols are usually ascribed to the Antioch mint. All coins clearly show the title AUG(ustus). The rather crude style of the coins, however, seems different from the normally quite elegant issues from the Antioch mint. Moreover, the patina/discolouration of the coins suggests a different metal composition than is usually the case. It has been suggested that these coins may have been struck at a 'mobile workshop' during the campaigns. At the same time, one might also think of a mint at the city of Emessa, especially since that centre had known a mint in the past with a more or less comparable minting style (coins at Emessa were struck during the reigns of Septimius Severus [198-211], the usurper Uranius Antonius [253-254], and Macrianus and Quietus [260-261]. Cf. Vaggi 1999). It seems reasonable to assume that such a mint at Emessa, if it existed, was active in the spring of 272—after the loss of Antioch to Aurelian.

before. Severina's new status is reflected on several coins, such as the one shown here; an AE-as from 274 AD. The absence of the usual reference to the senate—SC (Senatus Consulto)—is striking and reflects some of the problems Aurelian faced at home, after the defeat of Zenobia. This coin has been struck on the Emperor's own accord, without the Senate's consent, at a time when Emperor and Senate were at loggerheads over Aurelian's proposed reform of the monetary system. In the spring of that same year, Aurelian introduced a new type of coin, the Aurelianus, that was to serve as the basis of the reformed Roman monetary system until the reign of Diocletian (cf. Vagi 1999). The new coin, aptly named after the Emperor himself and struck with a relatively high percentage of silver, replaced the by now devalued Antoninianus.



Fig. 2. Severina Augusta.

Conclusion

The production of coins bearing the portraits of Zenobia and/or Vabalathus was restricted to a relatively brief period in Roman history. Judging the regnal years stamped on coins from Alexandria, it is likely that these coins were struck no earlier than 267, and no later than 272 AD. As I have shown above, the references to AUGUSTA and JUNO REGINA should be seen as Palmyrene attempts to achieve a pact on equal terms between Rome and Palmyra, rather than mere provocations. Palmyrene independence, however, seems only to have been feasible whilst the Roman armies were occupied with more urgent issues elsewhere (the above mentioned usurpations leading to what has been called the 'crisis of the 3rd century'). As soon as those problems had been addressed, however, Roman interest would inevitably turn towards the east. After the fall of Palmyra, Zenobia and her son Vabalathus were paraded through the streets of Rome in Aurelian's triumph, after which they disappear from history. Aurelian built a temple to the "Deus Sol Invictus", the invincible Sun, to commemorate his restoration of the Roman Peace. Its inauguration during the "Dies Natalis Solis Invicti" festival, on the 25th of December, 274 AD, may be seen as marking the end of the crisis of the 3rd century.



Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5



Fig. 6

- Fig. 3. Obverse: Aurelian (AD 273/274) as 'Restitutor Orientis' (Restorer of the East)
Reverse: Sol + 2 captives (Vabalathus & Zenobia?)
AV-Medallion, "Binio" (1 ½ aureus) 6,31 gr. Rome
- Fig. 4. Obverse: Salonina Augusta, AD 254-268
Reverse: Juno Regina (Goddess Juno with Peacock)
AR-Antoninianus, 3,24 gr. Antioch
- Fig. 5. Obverse: S. Zenobia Augusta, AD 271-272
Reverse: Juno regina (Goddess Juno with Peacock)
AE-Antoninianus, 3,02 gr. Antioch, Officina 8 (H)
- Fig. 6. Obverse: S Zenobia Augusta (hitherto unpublished coin type R5)
Reverse: Juno Regina
AE-as, 23 mm, 14,93 g. Sidon/Tyre/Akko



Fig. 7



Fig. 8



Fig. 9



Fig. 10

- Fig. 7. Obverse: Julia Maesa (AD ±180 - † 225),
Reverse: Zeus Heliopolites –COLO PTLOE
AE-Assarion, 6,84 gr. Col.Ptolema (Akko)
- Fig. 8. Obverse: Julia Maesa (AD ±180 - † 225)
Reverse: Sacred Chariot of Astarte
AE-Assarion, 16,67 gr., Colonia Sidon
- Fig. 9. Obverse: Julia Maesa (AD ±180 - † 225)
Reverse: Europa on the Bull
AE-Assarion, 8,15 gr. Col.Sidon
- Fig. 10. Obverse: Septimia Zenobia (AD 272) "ΣΕΠΤΙΜΙΑ ΖΗΝΟΒΙΑ ΣΕΒΑΣΤΗ"
Reverse: Homonoia (Concordia)
AE Tetradrachm, 8,34 gr. Alexandria 12,62 gr. (L E = year 5)



Fig. 11



Fig. 12



Fig. 13



Fig. 14

Fig. 11. Obverse: Septimia Zenobia (AD 272) CEITTIMIA ZHNOBIA CEB
Reverse: Elpis (Spes)
AE Tetradrachm, Alexandria (L E = year 5)

Fig. 12. Obverse: Septimia Zenobia (AD 272)
Reverse: Selene
AE Tetradrachme 7,97 gr. Alexandrië (L E = year 5)

Fig. 13. Aurelian/Vhabalathus (AD 271/272) as "Caesar"
AE-Antoninianus 3,63 gr. Antioch, Officina 4

Fig. 14. Vhabalathus/Aurelian AD 271/272, -V C R I M D R- ("Vir Clarissimus, Rex, Imperator, Dux Romanorum")
AR -Antoninianus 3,83 gr. Antioch, Officina 3 (from a private collection)



Fig. 15a



Fig. 15b



Fig. 16a



Fig. 16b



Fig. 16c



Fig. 17

- Fig. 15 a-b. 2 coins with Aurelianus and Vhabalathus
 Obverse + Reverse: IMP AVRELIANUS AVGVSTVS
 AE-Antoninianus, 3,92 and 2,62 gr. Antioch, Officina 3
- Fig. 16. 3 coins with Aurelianus and Vhabalathus
 AE-Tetradrachmes: Year 1 and 5.
 9,96 gr./8,82 gr./6,38 gr. Alexandria
- Fig. 17. Obverse: Vhabalathus (AD 272) as "Augustus": IMP C VHALATHVS AVGVSTVS
 Reverse: Hercules
 AE-Antoninianus 3,82 gr. Antioch, Officina 5 (Emesa?)



Fig. 18



Fig. 19



Fig. 20



Fig. 21

- Fig. 18. Obverse: Vhabalathus (AD 272) as "Augustus"
Reverse: VENUS AUG (Venus) –IV[V]EN[T]US AUG- ("the coming Augustus")
AE-Antoninianus 3,43 gr. Antioch/Emesa?
- Fig. 19. Obverse: Vhabalathus (AD 272) as "Augustus"
Reverse: AEQUITAS ("balance")
AE-Antoninianus 2,61 gr. Antioch/Emesa? No identified officina
- Fig. 20. Obverse: Vhabalathus (AD 272) als "Augustus"
Reverse: IOVI STATORI ("avenging Jupiter")
AE-Antoninianus Antioch/Emesa? No identified officina
- Fig. 21. Obverse: Vhabalathus (AD 272) as "Augustus"
Reverse: VIRTUS AUG ("Virtue")
AE-Antoninianus 3,34 gr. Antioch/Emesa? Officina 7



Fig. 22



Fig. 23



Fig. 24



Fig. 25

- Fig. 22. Obverse: Vhabalathus (AD 272) as "Augustus"
Reverse: VICTORIA AUG, striding Victoria with laurel
AE-Antoninianus 3,26 gr. Antioch
- Fig. 23. Obverse: Vhabalathus (AD 272) as "Augustus"
Reverse: VIRTUS AUG
AE-Antoninianus, 3,94 gr. Antioch/Emesa
- Fig. 24. Obverse: Vhabalathus (AD 272) as "Augustus"
Reverse: VIRTUS AUG
AR-Antoninianus, 3,49 gr. Antioch, Officina 2
- Fig. 25. Obverse: Vhabalathus (AD 272) as "Augustus"
Reverse: AETERNITAS, Sol with globe
AR-Antoninianus, 3,20 gr. Antioch



Fig. 26



Fig. 27



Fig. 28



Fig. 29

- Fig. 26. Obverse: Vhabalathus (AD 272) as "Augustus"
Reverse: standing Homonoia, year 5
Potin-Tetradrachm, 8,47 gr. Alexandria
- Fig. 27. Obverse: Aurelianus (AD 272)
Reverse: RESTITUTOR ORIENTIS ("Restorer of the East")
Kneeling Tyche (Antioch) and Aurelianus
AE-Antoninianus, 3,45gr. Antioch
- Fig. 28. Obverse: Aurelianus (AD 272)
Reverse: MARS INVICTUS
Mars and Sol with captive (Persian)
AR-Antoninianus, 3,45 gr. Siscia
- Fig. 29. Obverse: SEVERINA AUG (AD 274)
Reverse: -JUNO REGINA-
AE-as, 7,92 gr. Rome, Officina 7



Fig. 30

Fig. 30. Obverse: Probus (AD 276-282) VIRTUS PROBI AUG
Reverse: Tempel van Sol -SOLI INVICTO- SXXT
Antoninianus, Ticinum (AD 278 AD) 3,59 gr.

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Arjan Senden
Het Vlaggeschip 37
5237 PA Den Bosch
denarius@hetnet.nl