

Raphael Hunsucker/Evelien Roels/Martje de Vries (eds): *Zenobia van Palmyra. Vorstin tussen Europese en Arabische traditie*. Hilversum: Uitgeverij Verloren 2018 (*Zenobiareeks* 0). 86 p., 14 ill., 2 maps. € 13.00. ISBN: 978-90-8704-715-3.

The newly published number 0 in the *Zenobiareeks*, a series in which five volumes had already appeared between 2013 and 2018, is a collection of papers in Dutch on the famous Palmyrene queen, ‘between European and Arab traditions’, which first saw the light (with two additional pieces, not on Zenobia, that are not included here) in 2008 as a special issue of *Armada. Tijdschrift voor Wereldliteratuur* (vol. 14, no. 53) which had been edited by Diederik Burgersdijk.

Following a preface (7–8) by Martje de Vries, which explains the peculiar history of this collection and notes the tragic events which have ravaged Syria in recent years and which leave a harsh taste in the mouth when reading the original passages, kept unchanged on purpose, on the remaining beauty of the ruins of Palmyra, Diederik Burgersdijk asks, in what also was the introduction to the original publication (9–13), what can be known about who Zenobia actually was, replying to his own question with “more myth than human being” (13).

The great specialist on Palmyrene art and religion Lucinda Dirven investigates archaeological sources, sculptures and inscriptions to contextualise Zenobia’s unique position as a female ruler against the background of the position of women in Palmyra in general (15–23). Dirven follows the thesis put forward by the leading French epigrapher Jean-Baptiste Yon that Zenobia’s exceptional standing was, in fact, due to “her status as the widow of Odaenathus, who belonged to one of Palmyra’s most prominent families” and “as the mother of Vaballathus, the only heir to this lineage”. In other words, it can be seen “as a direct result of the conservative, patriarchal character of Palmyrene society” (23).¹

1 Zenobia has recently been treated with great sophistication by N.J. Andrade: *Zenobia. Shooting Star of Palmyra*. Oxford 2018 (*Women in Antiquity*), who investigated the famous queen within the framework of behaviour patterns and lived experiences of Palmyrene women in general. With regard to the latter, see now also the PhD thesis by S. Klaver: *Women in Roman Syria. The Cases of Dura-Europos, Palmyra, and Seleucia on the Euphrates*. Diss. Universiteit van Amsterdam 2019, esp. 119–203 (available online: https://pure.uva.nl/ws/files/33016873/Thesis_.pdf).

The next two, “diametrically opposed” (9) chapters, by Johan Weststeijn (25–30) and by Diederik Burgersdijk (31–40), deal with the two main literary traditions on Zenobia, namely Tabari’s tenth-century *History of Prophets and Kings*, in Arabic, and the fourth-century *Historia Augusta*, in Latin, respectively. Weststeijn presents Tabari’s self-contained novella about the queen as part of his adhortation to the various tribes of his own time to submit to Islam, and her rule as a “negative historical exemplum” (30), the fact that she counts as an illustrious Arab ruler centuries before Muhammad’s revolution notwithstanding. Burgersdijk discusses Zenobia’s biography which forms part of the unreliable Augustan History and which was aimed to mark the contrast between the weak emperor Gallienus, under whose reign the Roman empire was at risk to be broken up with the rise of separate power blocks in West and East, and the strong Aurelian, whose successful effort to enforce recentralization of power in the empire is said, by the *Historia Augusta* itself, to have led to a triumph in which the captive Zenobia was paraded alongside her Gallic counterpart Tetricus. Burgersdijk further comments on how this “totally fictitious” (33) biography of the Palmyrene queen was engaged with by Petrarca and – in a different manner – by Boccaccio, from whose writings further literary works and visual arts took their inspiration to continue the narration of Zenobia’s story.

One of these later receptions of Zenobia can be seen in Chaucer’s uncompleted *Canterbury Tales*. In his chapter (41–48), Wim Lindeboom draws attention to the emphasis in ‘The Monk’s Tale’, the section in which the respective narrator includes Zenobia (*sic*) in his collection of brief tragedies undergone by otherwise illustrious men, on the queen’s legendary chastity, thus elevating her “to an emblem of Medieval Christian virtuousness” (45), while simultaneously criticising the pleasure-seeking lifestyle of the narrator-Monk, in Chaucer’s typically both ironic and moralistic tone. Eric Moorman provides a wide-ranging overview of the figure of Zenobia in the visual arts throughout the centuries (49–56). Of particular interest is his observation that the Victorian painting ‘Queen Zenobia’s Last Look upon Palmyra’, by Herbert Gustave Schmalz, surprisingly depicts her as a Trojan heroine, in a scene directly influenced by Schliemann’s discoveries. Hein van Eekert studies Zenobia as she appears in operas (57–62), with particular attention to Rossini’s ‘Aureliano in Palmira’ from 1813, and Robbert Woltering shows how modern Arabic adaptations of Zenobia’s story are – due to European cultural influence on the Arab world – all based on the

version as it is known from the *Historia Augusta* rather than on the one preserved in Tabari's writings (63–68).

Judith Weingarten, she of the trilogy *The Chronicle of Zenobia* and her Zenobia weblog fame, gives a brief personal account of her continuing interest in the Palmyrene queen (69–73), and Jan van Aken, author of the novel *De Dwaas van Palmyra*, portrays Zenobia as everything but chaste in a short story that accounts how one of Aurelian's commanders is ordered to accompany her back to Rome and finds it hard not to fall for her flirtations and radiant sexuality (75–83).

This reedition, supplied with fresh illustrations, provides the collected essays with a new lease of life at the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the Dutch foundation named after the Palmyrene queen, Stichting Zenobia, but also at a time that the much documented destruction of the ruins at the oasis of Tadmor in the heart of the Syrian steppe has led to an unprecedented spike in interest in Palmyra's unique civilization, both within academia and among the wider public. As such, this handsome little volume is a welcome addition to the growing library on Palmyra, even though none of the publications from recent years have been taken into account and the original bibliographies at the end of the papers are not updated.²

2 See now, e.g., A. and M. Sartre: *Palmyre. Vérités et légendes*. Paris 2016, and M. Sommer: *Palmyra. A History*. London/New York 2018 (Cities of the Ancient World). See also T. Kaizer: The Future of Palmyrene Studies. In: *JRA* 29, 2016, 924–931.

Ted Kaizer, Durham
ted.kaizer@durham.ac.uk

www.plekos.de

Empfohlene Zitierweise

Ted Kaizer: Rezension zu: Raphael Hunsucker/Evelien Roels/Martje de Vries (eds): *Zenobia van Palmyra. Vorstin tussen Europese en Arabische traditie*. Hilversum: Uitgeverij Verloren 2018 (Zenobiareeks 0). In: *Plekos* 21, 2019, 339–341 (URL: <http://www.plekos.uni-muenchen.de/2017/r-hunsucker.pdf>).
