

Zenobia

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We, the followers of Zarathushtra, after commencing our unrelenting march following the death of the Prophet seemed to have retained certain indelible qualities. One among them, in the quest to adjust to changing circumstances, we have not hesitated to shed our family names to more 'suitable' ones to, as it were, go well with the trade, profession and place of our new settlements.

We have frequently adopted place names, trade names and even those of our opponents of the Primal Homeland. Semitic, Graeco-Roman and other alien names then followed. On the Subcontinent, the local place and trade names became a norm and the rate of change progressed further to Anglo-Saxon names, including even first names after the occupation by the British.

One such name has been the *Roman Zenobia (267-273 CE)*, who had shown hostilities towards Shahpur I (240-271 CE) Hormazd I (271-272 CE). [see 'Sassanian Dynasty - historical perspective', www.avesta.org - Shahpur I & Hormazd I]. Some Zarathushtis still believe it is an ancient Mazdayasni name. In Gujarati, the ubiquitous 'J' has somehow crept in and replaced 'Z'. The name has become '*Jeannie*' for short. I have met a Parsi lady called *Jenny* whose Gujarati birth name is Zenobia. There are other modern derivatives too, like *Zenia, Zeena, Zina*..... etc.

Who then was this much quoted Zenobia, who made even Rome so very uneasy during her six year rule? Born a Roman, she was quoted in admiration by the Roman Emperor *Aurelian (270-275 CE)*: "What a woman she is ... the wisdom of her decisions, her firmness in carrying them out, her security towards her soldiers, both generous as well as cruel as necessity calls ..." A woman of great ambition, energetic in military affairs, and adept at several languages, she certainly was resolute. She had a dark tan complexion from years of exposure to the sizzling heat of the Syrian Desert. Her wide eyes and glittering teeth made her look like a Roman 'Goddess'. She dressed like a Roman Emperor, wore a helmet and a purple cape of royalty. She could withstand the adversities of the harsh desert climate more than most soldiers with whom she marched on foot along with the battalion.



Zenobia, Queen of Palmira

The painting **[Fig 1]** by Giambattista Tiepolo 1730 CE, is based on the historical description of her features.

Many Italian operas and plays have been enacted in her name. Even an Italian film was made with Anita Ekberg as Queen Zenobia. Based in Antioch, the eastern capital of the Roman Empire, a Roman Commander, Septimus Oedinathus 257-267 CE (Pahlavi: Udainath) **[Fig 2]** managed to seize power from the Semitic tribal lords and keep the population entirely under his control.



Limestone statue possibly of Oedinathus

The place was a large lush green oasis (Arabic: *'Tadmor'* - city of date trees) in the midst of grassy hills in the rich caravan trade route linking Syria with the cities of Mesopotamia and along the Mediterranean Sea. He had managed to obtain support and recognition from Rome as a coalition ally hoping to destroy Ctesiphon, the Capital of Sassanian Airan. During the Parthian Era the Roman Emperor *Trajan (249-251 CE)* had annexed it to the eastern Roman Empire and had renamed it 'Palmyra' (city of palm trees). Populated by people of Semitic descent having a strong Hellenistic Parthian influence, their trade language remained Aramaic. Its great emporiums of exotic goods and its major region of cross roads made it a secular place of culture mixing East with West as documented by archaeological findings, its period of greatest splendour being 1st to 3rd centuries CE. **(Fig 3)**



Great Collonade and ruins of Palmyra

Having won some battles against the Hellenised Parthians in the past, the deluded Romans now planned to invade and conquer Sassanian Airan and destroy the capital city, Ctesiphon [see **'Sassanian Dynasty - historical perspective'**, www.avesta.org - **The Renaissance**]. On several occasions during the period 253-260 CE Valerian I continued to violate the peace treaty entered into by his predecessor, *Trajan 249-251 CE* in attempts to repossess Mesopotamia, which had been conquered by Ardeshir I (224-240 CE) from the Romans. In the *Battle of Edessa 258 CE*, Valerian's army was completely routed by Shahpur I. In the thick of the battle Shahpur himself captured Valerian. **[Fig 4]**



Naq e Rustom rock bas relief - Captured Valerian kneeling
in homage before Shahpur II, the Great.

The Roman ***Odenathus (257-267 CE), his wife, Zenobia and son, Vabalathus ((Pahlavi: Waballath) 267-271 CE*** made a surprise attack on Shahpur's retreating army to rescue Valerian. Suddenly caught unawares and unarmed, Shahpur's retreating army initially sustained heavy losses. Needless, Shahpur I managed to regroup his army and rout the attacking army of Zenobia, inflicting heavy losses in return. ***Valerian, imprisoned in Ctesiphon died in captivity 2 years later in 260 CE.***

Shahpur I pressed on with his campaigns against Rome and again seized their Eastern Capital Antioch and the major city, Caeseria. History records that the Romans had failed to win a single battle against the Sassanians (224-641 CE). Indeed, the decay and ultimate fall of the Roman Empire was largely due to their persistent and expensive futile efforts to cease the Sassanian Empire instead of concentrating on their possessions in Europe and Africa.

Unfortunately, the Roman Governor Herod, stationed in Antioch, plotted against Oedinathus and had him and his son by his first wife assassinated. Oedinathus's young son, ***Vaballathus 267-271 CE by his second wife, Zenobia*** was appointed ruler with his mother, Zenobia as 'Regent'. She soon embarked on her late husband's wishes of expansion and conquest. Her Commander, Cassius Longinus, who also acted as her young son's 'preceptor', along with General Septimus Zabdas conquered all of Syria, Lower Egypt around the Nile

Delta and decided it was time to take decisive action and prepared to invade Palmyra in 272 CE.

Meanwhile, Zenobia pleaded for help from Hormazd I (271-272 CE). Hormazd I failed to realize the importance of Palmyra as a buffer state and ignored Zenobia's pleas. Aurelian landed in Antioch and went on to defeat the Palmyrian forces in the Battle of Palmyra 272 CE. He then laid siege to the City of Palmyra and captured Zenobia (272 CE) and took her under fetters as a prize captive to Rome.

She was at first paraded in the streets of Rome in chains and then sentenced to be isolated under house arrest in a villa outside Rome, where she died the following year. Aurelian, as was feared, later returned with a grandiose plan to reconquer Mesopotamia and destroy Ctesiphon, capital of the Sassanian Empire. He also ordered that the City of Palmyra, which had once been spared, be sacked, plundered and the trade route and trading facilities destroyed. The trade route was converted later to a military garrison by Emperor Diocletian (284-305 CE). Soon, the remaining parts of the Palmirian Empire once more fell into Arab domination under Emir Fakhruddin.

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