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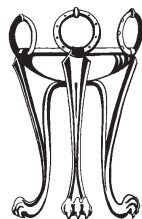
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Ted Kaizer

From Zenobia to Alexander the Sleepless Paganism, Judaism and Christianity at Late Roman Palmyra*

Palmyra will for always be associated with tower tombs and funerary reliefs, with well preserved colonnades and temples, and above all with caravan trade and with the rise and eventual fall of Zenobia's empire. The magnificent civilization of the city, as witnessed by (and given expression through) bilingual inscriptions, locally produced sculptures made in a style usually referred to as 'Parthian art', and Classical ruins, seems to have been restricted to a period of just over 300 years, with the earliest dated inscription from 44 BC and the latest one from AD 279/80, ca seven years after Aurelian's capture of the 'queen of the desert'. Of course, it has been known long since that there was both a much earlier Palmyra and a later one. On the one hand, Tadmor, the site's indigenous name, is recorded in tablets from Mari, while the stratification of the tell on which the temple of Bel was built goes back to the third millennium.¹ On the other hand, a spatially curbed Palmyra was turned into a military outpost in the *strata Diocletiana*, before a Christian town seems to have risen as a phoenix from the ashes of the caravan city by the reign of Constantine, to continue as such for at least a couple of centuries, as is also shown by a number of churches which have been excavated in recent years.² Both this earlier settlement and the later town, however, are commonly viewed as totally different in character and appearance from the 'Classical' Palmyra. As regards the earlier settlement, the limits of a directly continuing civilization have now been seriously stretched by the pioneering work of Andreas Schmidt-Colinet, in what has come to be known as 'Hellenistic Palmyra'. Schmidt-Colinet's explorations of the area directly south of the wadi and the resulting magnetogram have revealed the remains of a city which was perhaps less splendid than the one characterised by the colonnaded streets, but which nonetheless had formed very much part of the total urban package of the oasis, certainly from the period directly preceding the Roman one onwards into the early imperial period (and perhaps even until the wall of Diocletian came to decide the contrasting degrees of preservation to its north and its south?).³ In contrast to the groundbreaking archaeological work of the honorand, who has managed to roll back Palmyra's continuous history into the Hellenistic period, this little tribute to him by an Ancient Historian is concerned (needless to say on a much more modest scale) with the other side of the temporal spectrum, namely with the city's vicissitudes (and in particular the religious developments) following the apparent demise of its civilization. In the pages that follow, the hypothesis will be put forward that Palmyra's continuous history can perhaps be pushed further forward than is generally acknowledged too, and that at least some cultural elements known from the city's splendid civilization are recognizable also in the world of the later town (and vice versa).

* Most of the ideas for this paper were originally formulated as part of a more general opening lecture to a conference in Aarhus on 'Constructing Religious Identities: Space and Texts in the Pagan, Jewish and Early Christian Near East, AD 100–400' (14–16 May 2009). For that occasion, many thanks are due to Rubina Raja and Anders-Christian Jacobsen. I am very grateful to Verena Gassner and Ulrike Muss for inviting me to contribute to this Festschrift, and hence for giving me the opportunity to pay homage to a scholar who has always been very supportive of

my own work on Palmyra. The title of this paper is, of course, inspired by Sartre 2001.

1 On Tadmor in the Mari tablets see Scharrer 2002: 301–18. The 1960s exploration of the stratification of the tell has been re-examined by al-Maqdissi 2000.

2 On post-Classical Palmyra, see above all the overview article by Kowalski 1997. For recent findings, see the references below, in n.10.

3 Recently: Schmidt-Colinet e.a. 2008; For some splendid findings, see Schmidt-Colinet 2005.

The ‘afterlife’ of Palmyra is, in any case, very different indeed from that of those cities with which she is most often compared. As is well known, the eye-witness accounts by Ammianus Marcellinus, of both the disastrous Persian campaign of Julian ‘the Apostate’ and the march home by his successor Jovian, in both of which the historian participated, provide us with priceless records of the fourth-century conditions of towns and cities which had been flourishing until the mid-third century. As regards Dura-Europos, captured and destroyed by the Sasanians in the mid 250s, Ammianus (24.1.5) tells us how ‘after marching for two days we approached the deserted town of Dura, which lies on the river bank’ (*emenso itaque itinere bidui prope civitatem venimus Duram desertam, marginibus amnis inpositam*). Similarly, as regards Hatra, once a rich and monumental royal city in the north of Mesopotamia, but destroyed by Shapur in the early 240s, Ammianus (25.8.5) saw ‘an old city situated in an uninhabited area and deserted for a long time past’ (*vetus oppidum in media solitudine positum, olimque desertum*). These remarks in passing are very telling about the radical changes in fortune that certain sub-regions of the Near East underwent as a direct result of a handover of power – be it from Parthian to Sasanian, from Parthian to Roman, from Roman to Persian or vice versa. But in other cases the effects were much less devastating, and Ammianus’ references to both Dura-Europos and Hatra as deserted ghost towns in his own time, stand in sharp contrast to what happened at Palmyra.⁴

Life at the oasis did not stop to function when Aurelian crushed the usurpation attempt by Zenobia in ca AD 272. However, the few bilingual inscriptions from the end of the 270s, which record – corresponding to the traditional model of the Palmyrenean and Greek epigraphy of the city – the continuation of contributions to the ‘great basilica’ of the indigenous god Arsu,⁵ are usually explained as the final convulsions of a dying civilization. The unique bilingualism of Palmyra’s public inscriptions did indeed disappear (or in any case is no longer attested) after 279, and a similar statement can be made about the typically Palmyrene religious sculptures. Soon after, Palmyra was turned into a fortified link of the *Strata Diocletiana*, as is attested by a number of relevant Latin inscriptions, with the new walls cutting rather randomly through the heart of the old city.⁶ The *Notitia Dignitatum*, a list (of which four copies survive) of both military and civil offices in the Western and Eastern halves of Rome’s empire, as it was divided in 395, refers to Palmyra as the headquarters of the prefect of the *Legio I Illyricorum* – at least by the time of Jovian’s treaty with the Sasanians in 363 and probably earlier, perhaps already by the time of Diocletian’s restructuring of the Eastern frontier zone.⁷ According to Procopius, Justinian strengthened the walls in 527 and provided Palmyra with aqueducts.⁸ The fact that a bishop of Palmyra (named Marinus) is said to have been amongst the participants of the Council of Nicea

4 I am not very convinced by the hypothesis recently put forward by Wahls 2007, of a “Weiter-” or “Wiederbesiedlung” (101) of Dura-Europos following its capture by the Sasanians.

5 al-‘Asad and Gawlikowski 1986–87: n^{os} 7–8. Cf. Millar 1993: 335–6.

6 On the excavations in the so-called ‘camp of Diocletian’, including its inscriptions, see Gawlikowski 1984. Cf. Fellmann 1976. Cf. Millar 1987: 156.

7 *Notitia Dignitatum* (ed. O. Seeck, 1876), *Or.* 32.15: *Praefectus legionis primae Illyricorum, Palmira* (under the *Dux Foenicis*).

8 Note how Procopius in this passage (*De Aedificiis* 2.11.10–12) also links the ‘Saracen threat’ to Palmyra’s origins (translation following LCL): ‘Thus did the emperor Justinian assure the safety of Syria. And there is a city in Phoenicia by Lebanon, Palmyra by name, built in a neighbourless region by men of former times, but well situated across the track of the hostile Saracens. Indeed it was for

this very reason that they had originally built this city, in order, namely, that these barbarians might not unobserved make sudden inroads into the Roman territory. This city, which through lapse of time had come to be almost completely deserted, the emperor Justinian strengthened with defenses which defy description, and he also provided it with abundant water and a garrison of troops, and thus put a stop to the raids of the Saracens.’ (οὕτω μὲν Συρίαν Ἰουστινιανὸς βασιλεὺς ἐν τῷ ἀσφαλεῖ διεσώσατο. πόλις δὲ πού ἐστιν ἐπὶ Φοινίκης τῆς παρὰ Λίβανον Παλμύρα ὄνομα, ἐν χώρῳ μὲν πεποιημένη τοῖς πάλαι ἀνθρώποις ἀγείτονι, ἐν καλῷ δὲ τῆς τῶν πολεμίων Σαρακηνῶν διόδου κειμένη. τοῦτου γὰρ δὴ ἕνεκα αὐτὴν καὶ ὠκοδομήσαντο πρότερον, ὥς μὴ λάθοιεν οἱ βάρβαροι οὗτοι ἐξάπινα ἐς τὰ Ῥωμαίων ἤθη ἐμβάλλοντες. ταύτην βασιλεὺς Ἰουστινιανὸς διὰ χρόνου μῆκος ἔρημον ἐπὶ πλεῖστον γεγεννημένην ὀχυρώμασι τε λόγου μεῖζον ἐπιπρώσας, πρὸς δὲ καὶ ὑδάτων περιουσίας καὶ φυλακῆς τοῦ στρατιωτῶν ἐμπλησάμενος, τὰς τῶν Σαρακηνῶν ἐπιδρομὰς ἀνεχαίτισεν.).

in 325⁹ may perhaps be taken as an indicator of the city's newly found repute as a regional centre of Christianity around this time, a repute that – especially in the centuries to follow – may have been further indicated by a number of churches and possibly a baptisterium that have been unearthed in recent years, some of which seem to have functioned (even if not continuously) well into the Muslim period.¹⁰

Fergus Millar has recently drawn attention to the rather unexpected glimpse at the Christian Palmyra of the late fourth and early fifth century that is provided by the *Life of Alexander Akoimètos*, 'the Sleepless'.¹¹ This hagiographical biography, which was probably written towards the end of the fifth century, describes how Alexander, in his quest to find divine enlightenment, had been praying for twenty years on the Eastern banks of the Euphrates, where over four hundred monks gathered around him. With *Psalm* 1:2 in mind ('On the Law of the Lord he will meditate day and night'), he formulated a never-ceasing cycle of doxology and singing of hymns, performed by himself and his monks in continuous liturgical shifts, from which his group (for which we also have documentary evidence) would come to be known as the *Akoimètoi*, the 'non-sleepers'. With a retinue of seventy selected monks, Alexander (according to the hagiography) traversed the lands of Syria in absolute poverty. Having tested their faith in the steppe area, they then focussed on a number of strongholds along the Roman-Persian frontier, including Palmyra. The relevant passage in the hagiography is worth quoting in full:¹²

The blessed one [i.e. Alexander] traversed the entire desert with his brothers ceaselessly singing their psalms. They came to the city of Solomon named in the Book of Kings, a city he built in the desert called Palmyra. When its citizens observed from afar the multitude of brothers drawing near (and since they were, in fact, Jews, although they called themselves Christians), they shut tight the city gates and said to one another, "Who can feed all these men? If they enter our city, we will all starve!" When the holy man observed this he glorified God by saying, "It is better to trust in God than to trust in men. Take heart, brothers, that the Lord will visit us when we least expect it." Then the barbarians who lived in those parts showed them unusual compassion. They had spent three days in the desert when, as the holy man had said, God sent them camel drivers who lived four staging posts' distance from the city, all bearing supplies. These they received and shared after giving thanks to God. There was so much in abundance that even after receiving their own portions they found themselves providing the city's poor with the things sent to them.

9 Gelzer, Hilgenfeld and Cuntz 1995. For the Latin lists, see *ibid.*: 14–5, I.48 (*Marinus Palmiron*), II.45 (*Marinus Palmyrensis*), III.46 (*Marinus Palmyrae*) and IV.43 (*Marinus Palmina* [sic]). He is also mentioned in the Coptic list, as *marinos hm palmèron* (82–3, n° 49), and in both the Syriac lists, though in two different ways, each using a different name for the city: *mrynus dtdmur* (100–1, n° 47) and *mrynus dplmur* (122–3, n° 47). Note how the Armenian version gives the bishop a different name: *Paulinos i Yatmiurone*. Gelzer c. s. included the bishop in their 'index partum Nicaenorum restitutus' as Μαρκῖνος Παλμύρων (Ixi, n° 47). A bishop of Palmyra is not mentioned as such in the Greek lists, though one of them mentions Μαρκῖνος Φοινίκης (74, n° 110), which might well be a reference to the same man. See in general also Wallace-Hadrill 1982: 165–6 (Appendix 1: Eastern representation at Nicea).

10 E. g. Gawlikowski 2003; Majcherek 2005.

11 Millar 2008: 70–2. Cf. Caner 2002: 130–7.

12 Translation from the appendix in Caner 2002: 270–1. Greek text edited by de Stoop 1911: 685–6: ὁ δὲ μακάριος παρελθὼν πᾶσαν τὴν ἔρημον μετὰ τῶν ἀδελφῶν

ἀδιαλείπτως ψαλλόντων ἦλθον εἰς τὴν πόλιν Σολομῶντος τὴν ὀνομαζομένην εἰς τὴν βίβλον τῶν βασιλειῶν, ἣν ἔκτισεν εἰς τὴν ἔρημον, τὴν λεγομένην Πάλμυραν. οἱ δὲ πολλῖται, τὸ πλῆθος τῶν ἀδελφῶν θεασάμενοι μήκοθεν, καὶ ὄντες μὲν Ἰουδαῖοι ὀνομαζόμενοι Χριστιανοί, πλησιασάντων αὐτῶν, τὰς πύλας τῆς πόλεως ἀπέκλεισαν, πρὸς ἀλλήλους λέγοντες· τίς ὅλους τούτους δύναται θρέψαι; ἐὰν οὗτοι εἰς τὴν πόλιν ἡμῶν εἰσέλθωσι, λιμώττομεν πάντες. ὁ δὲ ἅγιος θεασάμενος ταῦτα, ἐδόξασε τὸν θεὸν λέγων· ἀγαθὸν πεποιθέναι ἐπὶ κύριον ἢ πεποιθέναι ἐπ' ἄνθρωπον. θαρσεῖτε, ἀδελφοί, ὅτι ὅθεν οὐ προσδοκῶμεν ἐπισκέπτεται ἡμᾶς ὁ κύριος. οἱ δὲ βάρβαροι οἱ ὄντες ἐν τοῖς τόποις ἐκείνοις παρεῖχον αὐτοῖς οὐ τὴν τυχοῦσαν φιλανθρωπίαν. τριῶν δὲ ἡμερῶν εἰς τὴν ἔρημον διαγόντων αὐτῶν, ἐξαπέστειλεν ὁ θεὸς κατὰ τὸν λόγον τοῦ ἁγίου καμηλαρίους ἀπὸ τεσσάρων μονῶν ὄντας τῆς πόλεως φέροντας πάντας τὰ ἀγαθὰ. καὶ δεξάμενοι καὶ εὐχαριστήσαντες τῷ θεῷ, μετέλαβον καὶ αὐτοί· καὶ οὕτως περιέσσευσεν ὥστε καὶ δεξάμενοι ἡρέθησαν αὐτοὶ παρέχοντες τοῖς πτωχοῖς τῆς πόλεως ἐκ τῶν ἀποσταλέντων αὐτοῖς.

The historicity of this passage can of course not be taken for granted, but it is nevertheless full of interesting information, and it sketches a rather realistic division between on the one hand a settled city population and on the other those inhabiting the steppe zones away from the oasis, following a more nomadic lifestyle.¹³ Similar social structures in the wider region are found in other works from this period too: in the first half of the fifth century, Sozomen, in his continuation of Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History*, records (6.38) how some of the Saracens – by now a common label for nomadic desert-dwellers – were converted to Christianity by priests and monks who, like Alexander the non-sleeper, dwelt in the steppe themselves too. Interestingly, the converted Saracens in this case are then said to have turned against the Sasanians, rather than against the Romans, as had previously been the case. As regards the interaction between city and nomads, as described in the *Life of Alexander Akoimètos*, not much seems to have changed then since the days of Palmyra's greatness in the second and third century.¹⁴ But it is of particular interest that, by the fifth century, Palmyra had acquired its reputation as 'city of Solomon' (ἡλθον εἰς τὴν πόλιν Σολομῶντος τὴν ὀνομαζομένην εἰς τὴν βίβλον τῶν βασιλειῶν, ἣν ἔκτισεν εἰς τὴν ἔρημον, τὴν λεγομένην Πάλμυραν). Or should we rather say that Palmyra had *regained*, or even *kept* that reputation? In the first century AD, the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus made the same connection in a well-known passage of his *Jewish Antiquities* (8.6.1 [153–154]):¹⁵

[Solomon] advanced into the desert of Upper Syria and, having taken possession of it, founded there a very great city at a distance of two days' journey from Upper Syria and one day's journey from the Euphrates, while from the great Babylon the distance was a journey of six days. Now the reason for founding the city so far from the inhabited parts of Syria was that further down there was no water anywhere in the land and that only in this place were springs and wells to be found. And so, when he had built this city and surrounded it with very strong walls, he named it Thadamora, as it is still called by the Syrians, while the Greeks call it Palmyra.

It is widely accepted by scholars that Josephus' account is based on a similar reference to Solomon building 'Tadmor in the wilderness' (וְיָבִן אֶת־תְּדֹמֹר בְּמִדְבָּר) in *2 Chronicles* 8:4; a reference, however, that itself is a misinterpretation of the mention of 'Tamar in the desert' (וְתָמָר בְּמִדְבָּר), rather than Tadmor, in the same context in *1 Kings* 9:18. But it is clear that the same connection was still, or again, made by a Christian audience four centuries on, either solely independently from the Scriptures (as is claimed by the hagiography, although the reference there is to the book of *Kings*), or also through Josephus.

The author of the *Life of Alexander Akoimètos* describes the citizens of Palmyra as 'in fact, Jews, although they called themselves Christians' (καὶ ὄντες μὲν Ἰουδαῖοι ὀνομαζόμενοι Χριστιανοί). It seems a far cry from the religious life of Palmyra as we know it for the first three centuries of our era, with its unique religious culture completely dominated by a multitude of polytheistic cults that came to the famous caravan city from various spheres of influence. To name but a few: Bel and Nebu were originally Babylonian; Allat and Baal-Shamin were carried to the city by tribal groups with a more nomadic background; Reshef and Shadrafa came from the West-Semitic world, and Yarhibol, Aglibol and Malakbel originated at Palmyra itself. Someti-

13 As Millar 2008: 72, states: "the story provides a vivid picture of islands of military strong-points and of urban settlements surrounded by desert, within which starvation is an ever-present threat, and outside of which barbarians and brigands roam."

14 Cf. Sommer 2005.

15 Translation and Greek text from LCL: ἐμβαλὼν δὲ καὶ εἰς τὴν ἔρημον τῆς ἐπάνω Συρίας καὶ κατασχὼν αὐτὴν ἔκτισεν ἐκεῖ πόλιν μεγίστην δύο μὲν ἡμερῶν ὁδὸν ἀπὸ τῆς

ἄνω Συρίας διεστῶσαν, ἀπὸ δ' Εὐφράτου μίᾱς, ἀπὸ δὲ τῆς μεγάλης Βαβυλῶνος ἑξ ἡμερῶν ἦν τὸ μῆκος. αἵτιον δὲ τοῦ τὴν πόλιν οὕτως ἀπὸ τῶν οἰκουμένων μερῶν τῆς Συρίας ἀπωκίσθαι τὸ κατωτέρω μὲν οὐδαμοῦ τῆς γῆς ὕδωρ εἶναι, πηγῆς δ' ἐν ἐκείνῳ τῷ τόπῳ μόνον εὑρεθῆναι καὶ φρέατα. ταύτην οὖν τὴν πόλιν οἰκοδομήσας καὶ τεύχεσιν ὀχυρωτάτοις περιβαλὼν Θαδάμοραν ὠνόμασε καὶ τοῦτ' ἔτι νῦν καλεῖται παρὰ τοῖς Σύροις, οἱ δ' Ἕλληνες αὐτὴν προσαγορεύουσι Πάλμυραν.

mes the Oriental deities were identified with Greek ones in the bilingual inscriptions from the city (e.g. Bel with Zeus; Allat with Athena), but in most cases it is clear that the Greek name is secondary. All these gods were, initially, worshipped in sanctuaries which had traditionally been built in mud-brick and were centred on a sort of chapel or series of niches with an altar in front of it and set in a sacred enclosure. As time went by, however, most of them had – over the first three centuries AD – gradually been transformed into monumental temples in Classical, ‘Graeco-Roman’ style.¹⁶ Since these monumental temple buildings, alongside with the splendid colonnaded street and the civic section that includes the agora, bathing complex and theatre, have come to dominate Palmyra’s much visited ruins, it does not come as a surprise that nearly all studies of Palmyra’s religious culture – including my own – have tended to ignore, or at least to minimise, the evidence for Jewish and Christian forms of worship.¹⁷

However, it may pay dividends to focus a bit more on the sources – admittedly scant as they are – for the monotheistic communities in Palmyra. In contrast to the magnificent and rightly famous murals from the synagogue at Dura-Europos, most of the evidence for Palmyrene Jews is relatively prosaic.¹⁸ The nomenclature of one bilingual funerary inscription from AD 212, despite its Aramaic part written in the Palmyrene script and formulated in the typical local style, leaves no doubt about the respective family being Jewish: it records how the brothers Zenobios/Zebeidah and Samuel erected a tomb in honour of their father Levi, son of Jacob, son of Samuel.¹⁹ Also from Palmyra itself, and indeed from what may well have been the door of a synagogue, come a few Hebrew inscriptions, quoting lines from the Hebrew scriptures, in particular from the book of *Deuteronomy* 6:4–9: שמע ישראל אלהינו (אדוני) אחד (‘Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is the one [Lord]’), which are the famous words at the beginning of a passage that ends with the exhortation ‘Thou shall write these words upon the posts of thy house and on thy gates’ (וכתבתם על מזוזות ביתך ובשעריך).²⁰ But the evidence does not stop at the oasis itself: the Jewish necropolis at Beth She‘arim, in the Galilee, has revealed a number of Palmyrene epitaphs, and also references to Palmyrene Jews in Greek inscriptions, such as the third-century text set up by the sons of a Palmyrene money-changer (Λεοντίου Πολυμυρηνοῦ [sic] τραπεζίτου ἡμεῖς).²¹ And some (more or less obscure) references to Palmyra and its Jewry can be found in rabbinic literature: for example the *Mishnah* tractate on ‘The Nazarite Vow’, in the third Seder (on ‘Women’), records how a certain Miriam of Palmyra contracted uncleanness when the blood of one of her offerings was tossed against the altar, and how she was then allowed to continue her offering after becoming clean again.²² The involvement of Palmyrene archers in the destruction of the Jewish Temple, and in the rape of women in that process, is hinted at in general terms by the Babylonian Talmud, whereas the Palestinian Talmud provides explicit numbers: ‘Said Rabbi Yohanan, “Fortunate is he who sees the fall of Palmyra, for she was a partner in the destruction of the first Temple and in the destruction of the second Temple. In the destruction of the first Temple Palmyra provided 8,000 bowmen, and in the destruction of the second Temple she provided 80,000 bowmen.”’²³ Although there is no hard evidence to prove that Palmyra had actually sent its archers to Jerusalem during the Jewish war (in any case, the number given

¹⁶ Cf. Gawlikowski 1990; Kaizer 2002.

¹⁷ Credit though should be given on this point to Février 1931: 219–26.

¹⁸ Schürer 1986: 14–5; Hartmann 2001: 324–32. Cf. Oppenheimer 1983: 444–5.

¹⁹ *CIJ* II, n° 820 = *PAT*, n° 0557 = *IJO* III, n° Syr49.

²⁰ *CIJ* II, n° 821 = *IJO* III, n° Syr44, with different readings of the first line. It should be noted that, whereas some scholars prefer to link the script of these particular Hebrew lines to the period before Aurelian’s capture of Palmyra, others date it to the later centuries. Cf. Février 1931: 220, “la paléographie ne fournit aucun argument

décisif”. For other biblical texts from Palmyra, see *IJO* III, n°s Syr45–7.

²¹ *CIJ* II, n° 1010 = *IJO* III, n° Syr51.

²² III *Nashim* (women), *Nazir* 6,11. For the translation, see Danby 1933. As the context is offerings at the Temple, hence pre-AD 70, this is the oldest reference to Palmyrene Jewry. See *IJO* III: 69.

²³ *Yebamoth* 16b; *Taanit* 4.5. Cf. the Midrashim *Be-reshit-rabbah* (Genesis, Vayera) 56.11 and *Echa-rabbati* (Lamentations) 2.2.4, albeit with different numbers than those given in the Palestinian Talmud. For other references, see Oppenheimer 1983: 442–3.

would certainly have been inflated beyond proportions), it may well be implied at the beginning of the last book of Tacitus' *Histories* (5.1), where, amongst the auxiliary units awaiting Titus in AD 70 in addition to the legions, 'there were also strong levies of Arabs, who felt for the Jews the hatred which is common between neighbours' (*et solito inter accolae odio infensa Iudaeis Arabus manus multique*).²⁴

In addition to all this, some fourth-century Christian authors hint at the alleged leaning towards Judaism by Zenobia, while linking the queen's Jewish sympathies to the activities of the notorious bishop Paul of Samosata, who is said to have become a powerful player on Palmyra's political scene.²⁵ According to Athanasius (*Historia Arianorum* 71.1), 'Zenobia was a Jew and patron of Paul of Samosata' (Ἰουδαία ἦν Ζηνοβία καὶ Παύλου προέστη τοῦ Σαμοσατέως), while Filastrius (*Diversarum haereseon liber* 36/64) mentions how Paul 'also taught Zenobia, at that time a queen in the East, to become a Jew' (*unde et Zenobiam quandam reginam in oriente tunc temporis ipse docuit iudaeizare*). Similarly John Chrysostom and, in the fifth century, Theodoret, hint at the similarities between the queen's and the bishop's religious sympathies.²⁶ Paul, of course, was not representing the orthodox variant of Christianity, as his teaching denied the divinity of Christ. In the words of Eusebius (*Hist. Eccl.* 7.27), 'he held low, degraded opinions about Christ, in defiance of the Church's teaching, regarding Him as in His nature just an ordinary man' (τοῦτου δὲ ταπεινὰ καὶ χαμαιπετῇ περὶ τοῦ Χριστοῦ παρὰ τὴν ἐκκλησιαστικὴν διδασκαλίαν φρονήσαντος ὡς κοινοῦ τὴν φύσιν ἀνθρώπου γενομένου). As bishop of Antioch, Paul found himself first accused and then condemned of heresy, at two local councils, and his political adversaries are said to have even petitioned the emperor (Aurelian) to force him to leave his church. It is easy to see how such Christian heresy has led our sources to the idea of a natural link between Paul and a ruler suspected of being either Jewish or a proselyte (or perhaps a so-called godfearer). However, one should not overlook the above-mentioned fact that Palmyra and hence its leadership were depicted very negatively in the rabbinic sources, due to the alleged involvement in the destruction of the Temple (taking place long before Zenobia of course), and one may wonder whether a Jewish queen would not have resulted in a more positive press.²⁷

Zenobia's alleged 'leaning towards Judaism', which is also attested independently of the episode involving Paul of Samosata,²⁸ could also be explained otherwise: the apparent Jewish allegiance of the royal house may more fruitfully be connected with the popularity in Palmyra of the so-called 'anonymous god'. The cult of this deity stood out amongst those of the multiple other gods and goddesses worshipped in the city, above all because it did not seem to have been concentrated in either his 'own', or in anyone else's sanctuary.²⁹ The small altars which were dedicated to him were set up, in large numbers, virtually everywhere throughout the city, though the local Efqa spring proved a particularly popular spot.³⁰ The 'anonymous god' similarly stood out

24 Since Rome often counted on military contributions from the kingdoms and principalities within its wider sphere of influence, it is not implausible that the passage in the Palestinian Talmud reflects a historical participation on the part of the Palmyrenes in the imperial enterprise that ended with the fall of Jerusalem. The claimed Palmyrene involvement in the destruction of Solomon's Temple was of course completely legendary, with the reproach of AD 70 extended to 587/6 BC. Cf. Kaizer 2004: 567–8. As regards the line in Tacitus, this *may* have been a reference to Palmyrenes, *regardless* of whether the label 'Arabs' would actually be a fitting one.

25 For a full discussion of the episode involving Paul, see the classic paper by Millar 1971, and Hartmann 2001: 315–23.

26 References in Millar 1971: 12 = id. 2006: 264–5.

27 As far as Zenobia herself is concerned, the Jerusa-

lem Talmud (*Terumoth* 8.12) tells the story of an appeal by Jewish elders to the Palmyrene queen, but, in the words of Millar 1971: 13 = id. 2006: 265, "the attitude expressed there is otherwise hostile."

28 In a remark about Longinus found in Photius (*Bibl.* 265), where the leading Greek scholar of his time is said to have often done legal business for Zenobia, queen of Osroene (*sic*: τὰ πολλὰ συνηγωνίζετο Ζηνοβίᾳ τῇ τῶν Ὀσροηνῶν βασιλίδι), 'about whom an old tradition reports that she converted from her Greek superstition to the customs of the Jews' (ἦν καὶ μεταβαλεῖν εἰς τὰ Ἰουδαίων ἔθνη ἀπὸ τῆς Ἑλληνικῆς δεισιδαιμονίας παλαιὸς ἀναγράφει λόγος).

29 On the 'anonymous god', see Gawlikowski 1990: 2632–4, with Kaizer 2002: 35, n. 2, and 160.

30 From this, Teixidor 1977: 122–30, and id. 1979: 115–9, put forward the (alternative) hypothesis that the

amongst his fellow Palmyrene deities because of the peculiar way in which his worshippers addressed him: in Palmyrenean Aramaic he was referred to most often as ‘He whose name is blessed for ever’ (*bryk šmh l’lm*), though occasionally also as ‘Lord of the world’ or ‘Lord of eternity’ (*mr’ lm*). He shared his main epitheta with the important local deity Baal-Shamin, and Michał Gawlikowski stated that “il ne fait pas de doute ... que le dieu anonyme est un aspect particulier de Ba‘alšamîn.”³¹ For Han Drijvers, the cult of the ‘anonymous god’ was “a development in a more spiritual direction”³² and – as such – it would be the most visible and hence most easily traceable *internal* development of the religious life of Palmyra.³³ However, any discussion of the ‘anonymous god’ must take account of the cult of (whether Zeus or Theos) *Hypsistos*, ‘the Highest’, with whom ‘He whose name is blessed for ever’ and the ‘Lord of the world/eternity’ are commonly rendered in bilingual inscriptions from Palmyra. Worship of *Hypsistos*, subject of a major article by Stephen Mitchell, was more widespread than that of any indigenous deity in the Eastern part of the Roman world, and this rather simple divine designation (of a god as the ‘highest’) was common amongst both pagans, Jews and Christians alike.³⁴ It is perhaps unavoidable, due to the peculiarity of a god known in a local Aramaic dialect as ‘He whose name is blessed for ever’, that – from a Palmyrene perspective – *Hypsistos* has too easily been interpreted as simply the Greek rendition of the ‘anonymous god’. Nevertheless, as far as I am concerned the evidence ought to be approached from a different angle: rather than an *internal* religious process that was *specific* to Palmyra, the cult of ‘He whose name is blessed for ever’ may then instead be understood as a *local response* to the *supra-regional worship* of *Hypsistos*, ‘the Highest’, who was attested throughout Greece, Asia Minor and Syria, and who could be linked to pagan, Jewish and Christian patterns of worship alike. It is doubtless simply the unique phenomenon of Palmyra’s public bilingualism that has in this peculiar case caused focus to be solely on the highly original formula in Palmyrenean-Aramaic, leading to an interpretation of the cult as a display of localised monotheistic tendencies within Near Eastern paganism, rather than as a local example of a much more widespread religious process that brought together aspects of polytheistic acts of worship with Judaism and early Christianity.

Whether all this actually explains anything about Judaism in Palmyra by the time of Zenobia remains of course rather tendentious. Similarly, worship of the ‘anonymous god’ – if viewed as the typically Palmyrene version of the cult of the ‘Highest’ god which could be shared between pagans, Jews and Christians – *may* be tentatively connected with what the author of the *Life of Alexander Akoimètos* states about Palmyra’s citizens in the late fourth and early fifth century: ‘in fact, Jews, although they called themselves Christians’ (καὶ ὄντες μὲν Ἰουδαῖοι ὀνομαζόμενοι Χριστιανοί). If a link is to be made – and it must be emphasised that this cannot be more than a hypothesis – it would go to show that perhaps there was indeed considerable continuity in religious terms between on the one hand the famous Palmyra of the caravan trade and of Zenobia, and on the other the fortress settlement as it appears in the hagiography of Alexander the non-sleeper. Again, it remains unclear how the phrase in the *Life* ought to be interpreted precisely, although it certainly illustrates that religious divisions in the ancient world were not necessarily as uncomplicated as modern perceptions should like to make them.³⁵ Whether the Palmyrene citizens who greeted Alexander the sleepless truly *were* Jews who called themselves Christians cannot be known and is hence an irrelevant question. As such, the statement invites

‘anonymous god’ was a ‘cultic formula’ that initially specified Yarhibol (the god of the Efqa spring). Most scholars, however, agree with a different explanation, see below, with n. 31.

31 Gawlikowski 1990: 2632. As Gawlikowski states, the argument goes back to Cumont 1926: 104, n. 4: “la formule anonyme est employée, moins pour ne pas profaner le nom de l’Être suprême, que pour marquer que nul ne

peut le définir.”

32 Drijvers 1976: 15.

33 Kaizer 2002: 35.

34 Mitchell 1999.

35 The remark also reflects, as stated by Millar 2008: 72, “communal tensions felt both more widely and in the Euphrates zone itself.” On those Jewish-Christian tensions in the East in general, see id. 2004.

comparison with the equally interesting fact that Benjamin of Tudela records that no less than two thousand Jews still lived in Palmyra in the twelfth century.³⁶ The widespread focus throughout the Mediterranean world on a god called *Hypsistos*, 'Highest', had already shown, much earlier, how religious boundaries could be blurred, both for participants in the various acts of worship and for interested onlookers alike. As regards Paul of Samosata, the heretic bishop who denied Christ's divinity, for Christian authors representing the orthodox strand within Christianity it was his very teaching which allegedly turned Zenobia towards Judaism. Surely the bishop did not see himself as a Jew, but over time his followers may well have come to be considered as such by outsiders.³⁷ Since Paul's arrival at the oasis can hardly have been an isolated incident, his presence at Zenobia's court implies that at least a number of Christians had settled at Palmyra by the 260s. It must remain completely unknown whether, prior to its capture by Aurelian, representatives of the orthodox element of Christianity were also present in the city (where, if they had been, they would inevitably have come to blows with Paul over Christ's nature). All that can be said is that in 325 Palmyra's bishop Marinus must have been considered sufficiently uncorrupted to attend the Council of Nicea, suggesting that the orthodox Christians had gained the upper hand by then – though (with the above hypothesis kept in mind) perhaps not the monopoly.³⁸

To complicate matters even further, it ought not to be forgotten that – despite the lack of evidence for Christianity at Palmyra before Aurelian (beyond Paul) – there are intriguing references in Sogdian and Coptic sources to Manichaean activities at Palmyra during the final years of its splendid civilization, hinting at the teaching of the cosmic conflict between the powers of Light versus Darkness to inhabitants of the oasis.³⁹ As is well known, the religion that Mani founded within the Sasanian empire towards the middle of the third century AD was a form of gnosticism, which – with its focus on asceticism and especially universalism – proclaimed to be a completion of what earlier religious prophets and leaders, such as the Buddha, Zoroaster and Jesus, had preached. But perhaps the most relevant aspect of Manichaeism in this context is that it was an actively *missionary* religion, and as such it is not unlikely that the recorded tradition of a visit by Mani's apostles to Zenobia's court reflects an actual historical event. After all, most routes from the Sasanian heartland to the Mediterranean would have gone via the caravan centre in the Syrian steppe that was Palmyra, and besides, the city's new ruling house had quickly gained a reputation for being surrounded with what Richard Stoneman fancifully labelled a "cabinet of intellectuals",⁴⁰ amongst whom were the rhetorician and philosopher Cassius Longinus and (though more doubtful) the authors Callinicus of Petra and Nicostratus of Trapezus.⁴¹ However, the recorded *specifics* of the Manichaean mission at Palmyra must be treated with some more suspicion: set in a purely hagiographical context, the conversion of Zenobia's sister Nafsha by the Manichaean bishop Adda and his companion Abiesus, and Zenobia's subsequent support to the elsewhere persecuted sect, are not corroborated by any other source.⁴² And, since not only a sister to the famous queen is unknown from documentary evidence, but also her name, 'Nafsha', is not otherwise attested at Palmyra,⁴³ the story is perhaps best treated with a healthy scepticism.

³⁶ Gerrans 1783: 89–90.

³⁷ Perhaps those Palmyrene Christians that were viewed as heretic by the orthodox ones took advantage of their supposed 'overlap' with Judaism when the going got tough? The provincial governor who was responsible for the newly built imperial military headquarters at Palmyra under Diocletian was Sossianus Hierocles, who went on to gain great notoriety for his role in the Christian persecutions of 303 (and had by then probably written two books aimed against the Christians). Cf. *PLRE* I: 432, and for discussion of the wider context Barnes 1976. It may have been convenient to be perceived as Jews.

³⁸ For the hypothesis (based purely on onomastics)

that a Palmyrene, or at least someone of Palmyrene origin, was bishop in Mesene and as such a victim of the fourth-century persecutions under Shapur II, see Tubach 1993.

³⁹ For an overview, see Hartmann 2001: 308–15.

⁴⁰ Stoneman 1992: 129–32.

⁴¹ All references, with detailed discussion, in Hartmann 2001: 300–8. Cf. Bowersock 1987.

⁴² Tubach 1996. Cf. id. 1995, for the hypothesis, based again on onomastics, that Mani had boarded the ship of a Palmyrene merchant at the port town Forat in Mesene.

⁴³ Note that id. 1996: 208, put forward the hypothesis, with reference to Stark 1971: 38, that the attested name Nabushay (*nbwšy*), a hypocoristicon of the not attes-

In any case, evidence for success of the Manichaean mission is lacking, but if it had any lasting effects at the city these could perhaps be explained, as Stephanie Dalley argued, by the fact that the legacy of Mesopotamian culture at Palmyra could have provided a breeding ground for the sect known to have included older Babylonian material in some of its own sacred texts.⁴⁴

At the end of this paper, I return briefly to Palmyra's much better known polytheistic religious culture. The great variety of gods and goddesses that had characterised the city throughout the Roman period is generally assumed to have died out soon after Aurelian's victory over Zenobia. As we have seen above, the inscriptions recording contributions to the basilica of Arsu which date to 279 (i. e. ca six or seven years after the traumatic events) are waved aside as exceptions to the rule. Indeed, neither the public bilingualism, nor the religious sculpture (in the so-called 'Parthian art' style), which had been the traditional vehicles to represent pagan religious culture, are attested afterwards. However, excavations in the temple of Allat-Athena have revealed how the orientation of a later gate deviates from that of the earlier temenos. Six columns were taken from their original position in one of the porticoes of the temple and set up again outside the propylaea, as part of a reconstruction process which must have been due to the building of the newly added section of Palmyra commonly known as the 'camp of Diocletian' (whose main axes had an orientation which diverged from that of the sanctuary).⁴⁵ This suggests that the temple of Allat remained in use as a sanctuary, though perhaps it now came to be frequented in particular by Roman soldiers, by whom the indigenous goddess, long since identified in Greek with the warlike Athena, could have been interpreted as Minerva, who herself was associated with military matters.⁴⁶ It has indeed been argued by some that it was not until the late fourth century that the cult of Allat at Palmyra was finally suppressed. Barbara Gąssowska drew attention to a decapitated statue of the goddess from this temple, with its facial features scrupulously obliterated, and the statue itself cut in pieces which were found scattered throughout the sanctuary.⁴⁷ She proposed to link this example of the "archaeology of religious hatred" (to borrow the title of a recent book by Eberhard Sauer⁴⁸) to the activities of Maternus Cynegius, the prefect of 'Oriens' under Theodosius the Great who gained notoriety for his destruction of a number of pagan sanctuaries in the Eastern empire in general and the Near Eastern region in particular (such as the temple of Zeus Belos at Apamea and shrines at Edessa), following the encouragement of bishop Marcellus of Apamea.⁴⁹ Again, there can be no absolute certainty that the indigenous Palmyrene cult of Allat (even if only in Roman format) continued until the late fourth century, or that it was indeed Maternus Cynegius who put an end to it. However, the discussion strongly suggests that some form of worship of Allat continued well beyond Palmyra's capture by Aurelian, and into the city's early 'Christian' period. Since the uprooting of pagan cults in the Roman East at large did not happen overnight, but rather was an ongoing process for many centuries,⁵⁰ this should not be perceived as surprising. In any case, it would perfectly match the other hints of a continua-

ted *nbw-šwr(y)*, 'Nabu is my stronghold', lies behind the name of Zenobia's alleged sister. Cf. Hartmann 2001: 313, n.195: "zu spekulativ".

⁴⁴ Dalley 1995: 149–50.

⁴⁵ E. g. Gawlikowski 1983: 61–3.

⁴⁶ Minerva had taken over the Quinquatrus festival on 19 March in Rome, which traditionally opened the army's campaign season, from Mars. Cf. König and König 1991: 55–6.

⁴⁷ Gąssowska 1982. Recently, Gawlikowski 2008: 410–1, has argued that this gigantic marble statue must have been brought to the temple of Allat „only in the last stage, after the days of Zenobia“ and that therefore „Allat truly became Athena (or should we say Minerva) only in

the midst of the barracks of a Roman legion“.

⁴⁸ Sauer 2003. On the case of Allat at Palmyra, see *ibid.*: 49–52.

⁴⁹ Theodoret, *Hist. Eccl.* 5.21.7 (Apamea), and Libanius, *Or.* 30.44–6,50 (Osrhoene), with *PLRE* I: 235–6. Cf. Zos. 4.37.3.

⁵⁰ This is clear, e.g., from the 6th-century *Discourse on the Fall of the Idols*, by Jacob of Sarug, which links specific deities with specific cities in the Near East, where they had been 'installed by Satan' (e. g. Apollo at Antioch, Nebu and Bel at Edessa, Sin at Harran, Astarot at Sidon). For the relevant section of the text, see Martin 1875: 110, line 42–112, line 91.

tion of at least some aspects of religious culture at Palmyra beyond the watershed of the city's fall in the early 270s.

Abbreviations

<i>CIJ</i>	Frey, J.-B. (1936–52), <i>Corpus Inscriptionum Judaicarum</i> I–II. Rome.
<i>IJO</i>	Noy, D. and Bloedhorn, H. (eds.) (2004), <i>Inscriptiones Judaicae Orientis</i> III, <i>Syria and Cyprus</i> . Tübingen.
<i>PAT</i>	Hillers, D. R. and Cussini, E. (1996), <i>Palmyrene Aramaic Texts</i> . Baltimore.
<i>PLRE</i>	Jones, A. H. M., Martindale, J. R., and Morris, J. (1971), <i>The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire</i> I. Cambridge.

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