

Aurelian's Conquest of Palmyra

Source: Vopiscus: Life of Aurelian. From: William Stearns Davis, ed., Readings in Ancient History: Illustrative Extracts from the Sources, 2 Vols. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1912-13), Vol. II: Rome and the West. Scanned by: J. S. Arkenberg, Dept. of History, Cal. State Fullerton. Prof. Arkenberg has modernized the text.

During the disasters of the middle of the third century CE the Asiatic provinces of the Empire were nearly torn away, first by the Persians, then by the rulers of Palmyra, a thriving and powerful city situated upon an oasis in the Syrian desert. From 266 to 273 CE. the sovereign of this city and the "Queen of the East" was Zenobia, a woman of courage and energy, who almost founded an Oriental empire to the detriment of Rome. From this dismemberment the Roman world was saved by the Emperor Aurelian, who among his other conquests overcame Zenobia and destroyed Palmyra (273 CE), after no puny struggle.

After taking Tyana and winning a small battle near Daphne, Aurelian took possession of Antioch, having promised to grant pardon to all the inhabitants, and—acting on the counsel of the venerable Apollonius—he showed himself most humane and merciful. Next, close by Emesa,¹ he gave battle to Zenobia and to her ally Zaba—a great battle in which the very fate of the Empire hung in the issue. Already the cavalry of Aurelian were weary, wavering, and about to take flight, when, by divine assistance, a kind of celestial apparition renewed their courage, and the infantry coming to the aid of the cavalry, they rallied stoutly. Zenobia and Zaba were defeated, and the victory was complete. Aurelian, thus made master of the East, entered Emesa as conqueror. First of all he presented himself in the temple of Elagabalus, as if to discharge himself of an ordinary vow—but there he beheld the same divine figure which he had seen come to succor him during the battle. Therefore in that same place he consecrated some temples, with splendid presents; he also erected in Rome a temple to the Sun, and consecrated it with great pomp.

Afterward he marched on Palmyra, to end his labors by the taking of that city. The robber bands of Syria, however, made constant attacks while his army was on the march; and during the siege he was in great danger by being wounded by an arrow. Finally, wearied and discouraged by his losses, Aurelian undertook to write to Zenobia, pledging her—if she would surrender, to preserve her life—in the following letter: "Aurelian, Emperor of Rome and Restorer of the Orient to Zenobia and those waging war on her side. You should have done what I commanded you in my [former] letter. I promise you life if you surrender. You, O Zenobia, can live with your family in the place which I will assign you upon the advice of the venerable Senate. You must deliver to the treasury of Rome your jewels, your silver, your gold, your robes of silk, your

horses and your camels. The Palmyrenes, however, shall preserve their local rights."

Zenobia replied to this letter with a pride and boldness, not at all in accord with her fortune. For she imagined that she could intimidate him. "Zenobia, Queen of the East, to Aurelian Augustus. No one, saving you, has ever required of me what you have in your letter. One ought in war to harken only to the voice of courage. You demand that I surrender myself, as if you did not know that the Queen Cleopatra preferred to die rather than to live in any other save her station. The Persians do not abandon us, and we will wait their succors. The Saracens and the Armenians are on our side. The brigands of Syria have defeated your army, O Aurelian; what will it be when we have received the reinforcements which come to us from all sides? You will lower then that tone with which you—as if already full conqueror—now bid me to surrender."

On the reading of this letter the Emperor did not blush, yet he was angered, and at once assembling his army with his generals, and surrounding Palmyra on all sides, the great Emperor devoted his attention to everything; for he cut off the succors from the Persians, and corrupted the hordes of Saracens and Armenians, winning them over sometimes by his severity, sometimes by his adroitness; in brief, after many attacks, the valiant Queen was vanquished. Although she fled on camels by which she strove to reach the Persians, the cavalrymen sent in pursuit captured her, and brought her to Aurelian.

The tumult of the soldiers—requiring that Zenobia be given up for punishment—was very violent; but Aurelian conceived that it would be shameful to put to death a woman, so he contented himself with executing most of those men who had fomented, prepared, and conducted this war, reserving Zenobia to adorn his triumph and to feast the eye of the Roman People. It is grievous that he must need place in the number of those massacred the philosopher Longinus, who was—it is said—the master of Zenobia in the Greek tongue. It is alleged that Aurelian consented to his death because there was attributed to him that aforementioned letter so full of offensive pride.

It is seldom and even difficult that Syrians remain faithful. The Palmyrenes, who had been defeated and conquered, seeing that Aurelian had gone away and was busy with the affairs of Europe, wished to give the power to one Achilles, a kinsman of Zenobia, and stirred up a great revolt. They slew six hundred archers and Sandrion, whom Aurelian had left as governor in their region; but the Emperor, ever in arms,

¹ A very sacred city, and the great seat of the worship of the Syrian sun god Elagabalus.

hastened back from Europe, and destroyed Palmyra, even as it deserved.

In his magnificent triumph, celebrated in Rome after Aurelian had conquered Tetricus, the usurping "Emperor of Gaul," and other enemies, Zenobia was led in procession

exposed to public view, adorned with jewels, and loaded with chains of gold so heavy that some of her guards had to hold them up for her. Later, however, she was treated with great humanity, granted a palace near Rome, and spent her last days in peace and luxury.