

Palmyra and the Third Century Crisis^{*}

Entangled Perspectives

RUBINA RAJA / EIVIND HELDAAS SELAND

The third century, particularly the five decades after 235 CE, has traditionally been viewed as a period of profound crisis, characterised by political upheaval, violence, war—including civil wars, religious strife, hyperinflation, climatic instability, pandemics, and border incursions (Potter, 2004; Harper, 2017). The nature and impact of these developments have been among the key topics in Roman archaeology and history for a long time. Although some of the points have been nuanced or called into question in recent scholarship, emphasising that the crisis or crises did not extend to the same degree to all regions of the Empire or to all segments or groups within a spectrum of very diverse societies (Ruffing, 2023; this volume), an overall picture of an empire in deep trouble, but at the same time in possession of remarkable resilience prevails (de Blois, 2002; Liebeschuetz, 2007; Erdkamp, 2019).

The time of Roman crisis coincides with the peak of Palmyra's prosperity, urban development and societal expansion (Raja, 2022). The period spans the time of Palmyrene drift towards centralised rulership and short-lived political hegemony in the Near East, as well as the city's reach for imperial power and its downfall in the years 270–272 CE, followed by the transformation from semi-autonomous regional power to a Roman garrison town on the eastern frontier of the Empire (Sommer, 2008; Southern, 2008; Andrade, 2018; Intagliata, 2018; Hartmann, 2001; 2024).

* The editors wish to thank Centre for Urban Network Evolutions, Aarhus University for their support. We also thank the Carlsberg Foundation and the Danish National Research Foundation (grant: DNRF119) for their financial support for the conference and the publication, and Franz Steiner Verlag and the editors of the *Oriens Occidens* series, with main editor Prof. Dr. (em.) Josef Wiesehöfer, for the opportunity to publish the volume in the series. We would also like to thank Professor (em.) Christopher H. Hallett for taking part in the conference as a moderator, shaping the discussions reflected in this volume, and Nathanael Andrade, Andrew Wilson, and Jean-Baptiste Yon for their inputs in the editing process as well as Dr. Eleanor Quasebarth Neil (UrbNet) for her diligent editing of the contributions.

The last decade and a half have seen an extraordinary increase in scholarship on Palmyra (cf. Raja & Seland, 2024). Expanding opportunities to include data from the natural sciences into archaeological and historical research have allowed scholars to address new and hitherto understudied aspects of the city's past (Romanowska, Jimenez et al., 2021; Raja et al., 2021; Romanowska, Bobou, & Raja, 2021). But the many conference reports, monographs, and shorter studies addressing the ancient Syrian desert city have thus far not shed much light on how these phenomena relate, and how the discrepancy between metropolitan crisis and peripheral prosperity can best be explained. This is the aim of the current volume, which is the outcome of a conference devoted to the topic, which was held at the Royal Danish Academy of Sciences and Letters in March 2024. Along with experts on different aspects of Palmyra in the third century, the conference gathered scholars working with the Roman Empire in general, and with neighbouring regions inside and beyond the imperial borders. The contributions highlight parallels, discrepancies, connections, and disconnections between developments in Palmyra and other parts of the world with which Palmyra interacted. The result has, we hope, been a more critical, detailed, and nuanced picture of the situation in the Roman Near East in the third century CE than has been available until now.

The first cluster of contributions in this volume revisits the notion of a crisis in the Roman Empire in the third century, examining how the many predicaments of the period played out in different spheres. Kai Ruffing takes stock of the scholarly debate, discusses the major societal stressors, but also highlights continuities and regional diversities that play down the image of a general crisis and may help explain the continued prosperity and rise to regional power of Palmyra. Michael Speidel surveys the crisis from the viewpoint of the army and arrives at the conclusion that the threat to the system during this period was indeed existential, and that the many changes that the Roman military forces went through must be interpreted as responses to this threat which were ultimately successful in that the Empire and the army emerged intact from the crisis. Wolfgang Spickermann addresses the sphere of religion, highlighting changes in the imperial cult and growth of new forms of collective worships. This, he argues, is not a result of the crisis, but a continuation of developments starting in the previous century, while the decrease of votive monuments across the Empire and the end of votive inscriptions in the West, on the other hand, were probably connected to the economic problems caused by military, environmental, and epidemiological developments in the period.

The second group of chapters approaches Palmyra from the perspective of neighbouring regions, in order to address the question of whether the crisis was a Roman phenomenon or a system-wide, proto-global development. Matthew Canepa takes us to the Iranian-Mesopotamian world, where the replacement of the Arsacid dynasty after nearly five centuries and the reduction of the Kushan Empire at the hands of the Sasanids must undoubtedly be described as a crisis, but where the Sasanids emerge at

the head of a new, politically stable, hegemonic system after only a relatively short period of disruption. Tomas Larsen Høisæter proceeds eastward to Inner and East Asia, at the other end of the commercial systems of which Palmyra was a part. East Asia, with the long-term collapse of centralised Chinese imperial power, certainly went through a crisis that was equally profound and had even more dramatic consequences than that of the Roman world, but in the wake of waning metropolitan power, polities on the northern and western edge of the Chinese world were able to assert themselves politically and economically in an unprecedented manner. Eivind Heldaas Seland looks to Arabia and the Western Indian Ocean, to the places where the Palmyrenes went to procure the goods they shipped to the Roman world. Somewhat parallel to the Iranian world and Inner Asia, the third century stands forth as a period of new beginnings in Arabia and the Indian Ocean. New hegemonic powers emerge in Africa and Arabia, and commercial networks continue to operate after the Romans withdraw from the region. Palmyra seems to be one of the players in this game of war, diplomacy, and trade until the demise of the city in 272/73 CE.

The final group of contributions zooms in on the Roman Near East broadly and developments in Palmyra specifically. J. A. Baird asks what it was like to live through a period of crisis. She uses the archaeological record of urban housing from Palmyra and the nearby settlements of Zeugma and Dura Europos as a way to approach the history of the people who only figure in the literary and epigraphical accounts as witnesses to and victims of armies that passed by or came to stay in the places they called home. Olympia Bobou and Rubina Raja draw on the large amount of archaeological and epigraphic data that has been collected by the Palmyra Portrait Project and the Circular Economies Project at Aarhus University during more than a decade of intensive research, in order to assess developments in Palmyra during the third century. Results indicate that the image of uninterrupted growth and increased prosperity in the period might be deceptive, opening new perspectives also on the Palmyrene Empire and the Palmyrene revolt.

Sarah Madole Lewis turns to the material culture of the Roman East and looks in particular at sarcophagi as expressions of the third-century crisis. In recent years it has become clearer that quantification of groups of material such as sarcophagi might contribute immensely to a better understanding of flows and fluctuations in the societal economies and processes in general (Bobou & Raja, 2023). Lewis's contribution underlines this move towards a firmer integration of the material culture into historical narratives and conclusions. This is followed by a chapter by Françoise Briquel-Chatonnet discussing the development of a modest tradition of Edessenian Aramaic epigraphy into the rich record of Syriac literature which interestingly and perhaps significantly takes place parallel to the disappearance of the Palmyrene tradition of writing. Lucinda Dirven turns to the topic of religion in third-century Palmyra, and in particular whether the cult of the so-called anonymous deities and the god referred to only as 'He whose Name is Blessed Forever' should be seen as a parallel to the developments

in the Roman Empire outlined in Spickermann's chapter. This she rejects and argues that most Palmyrenes remained conservative in the face of religious changes outside of the city. Palmyrene religion was extremely locally focused and structurally inherent in the oasis society. Jean-Baptiste Yon surveys the epigraphic tradition of Palmyra in the third century with an emphasis on the dramatic break in and immediately after 272, where we see a downward curve in the epigraphic habit and a shift in what was inscribed due to the changed political and social status of Palmyra and the drop in resources. Andrew Wilson re-examines the evidence of Palmyrene military presence in Egypt, arguing that the system of Red Sea and Indian Ocean trade was profoundly affected as a consequence of the Palmyrene invasion of Egypt, which resulted in the withdrawal of the Palmyrene garrisons from the routes between the Nile and the Red Sea, and Roman loss of control over the Eastern Desert. Along the way he examines the chronology of the Palmyrene revolt in detail, with the implication that we might have to reconsider the traditionally accepted chronology of the revolt and Aurelian's campaigns of reconquest. Wilson shows how evidence from outside Palmyra can underpin alternative chronologies for the city's downfall and how, when held up against the evidence from the city, we might still learn new things about the way in which the Palmyrenes tackled the years right before their downfall. Nathanael Andrade's contribution addresses the Palmyrene revolt under Zenobia and its reception in modern scholarship, before discussing new ways of approaching the wider significance of Palmyra in the third century and beyond, including its role as a vector of communication between the Levant and Mesopotamia. The volume closes with a chapter by Emanuele E. Intagliata looking onward towards later periods of Palmyrene history. What parts, if any, of the pre-272 heritage of Palmyra lived on after the sack? How did the events of the third century shape the later history of the Syrian Desert city?

As the studies presented here make clear, the crisis was real, but it took time before it was felt at Palmyra. When that happened, by the mid-third century, it had an impact on construction activity, dedication of inscriptions, and likely on the important caravan trade with Mesopotamia (Bobou & Raja, this volume; Yon, this volume; Raja, Bobou, & Romanowska, 2021; Hartmann, 2024). What caused a general period of crisis in the Roman Empire after 235 CE to spill over to Palmyra and the Roman Near East can at present not be established securely. The plague of Cyprian, starting in Egypt in 249 (Harper, 2017; Huebner, 2021; Ruffing, this volume; Wilson, this volume) is one possible trigger. The major Sasanian, Roman, and, in the later part of the period, also Palmyrene military campaigns in Syria and Mesopotamia, 238–260 must have affected Palmyra in a number of ways (Maksymiuk, 2015, pp. 16–18 and 29–30). Climate deterioration in the second half of the third century affecting Palmyrene food security has also been suggested as a stressor in the period leading up to the Palmyrene revolt (Campmany Jiménez et al., 2022).

If we accept that Palmyra was faced with grave problems by the mid-third century, the responses should be possible to discern in the historical, archaeological, and ep-

igraphic records. Dirven's argument (this volume) for religious conservatism could be such a response. Politically and economically the drift towards monarchical rule and regional empire might also be seen in this context, as it consolidated Palmyrene control of the border region and provided income in the form of rents, tribute, taxes, and plunder (Hartmann, 2024). Many commentators have argued that the Sasanian takeover and frequent military activity in Mesopotamia must have hindered Palmyrene trade (Hartmann, 2021, pp. 76–85; 2024; Smith, 2013, pp. 175–177; Sommer, 2018, pp. 154–155; *contra* Seland, 2016, pp. 78 and 85), and Wilson (this volume) suggests that this may have caused the Palmyrenes to focus their commercial activity on the Red Sea.

Moving beyond the Roman world, to the western Indian Ocean, Iran, Mesopotamia, and Inner Asia, the impression of general crisis is less clear, in the sense that although the mid-third century was evidently a period of political turmoil, it was also a time when the cards were dealt anew. Polities and dynasties were jockeying for position, and some, including the Sasanians in Mesopotamia, the Aksumites in the Southern Red Sea, the Himyarites in South Arabia, and the city states of the Tarim Basin, emerged extremely successfully, laying foundations for political and economic structures that would dominate until the Arab expansion several hundred years later (Canepa, this volume; Høisæter, this volume; Seland, this volume). On a regional level we might ask if the Edessan rise to prominence in the Aramaic world in this period should also to some extent be ascribed to the demise of Palmyra (Briquel-Chatonnet, this volume). Regarding Palmyra itself, it seems reasonable to view the spectacular rise of the city under the dynasty of Odaenathus as a credible, although ultimately self-destructive, attempt to assert its position in this changing world.

As the contributions in this volume make clear, events in Palmyra did not happen independently of the third-century crisis, nor do they contradict the impression of a general crisis in the Roman world in the third century. Rather, events in Palmyra were contingent on the crisis and represent attempts by Palmyrene population and elites to make the best out of a situation that, on the one hand, caused grave problems but, on the other hand, created room for opportunity. The inhabitants of Palmyra had always been good at exploiting their position at the edge of the Roman world, and for a long time they succeeded in riding the waves that rippled the Roman Empire and neighbouring regions in the third century. Thus, the case of Palmyra might also contribute to our understanding of the development in the Roman world at large. Metropolitan weakness could under certain circumstances open opportunities for agents in the periphery, explaining why some regions and some sectors of society fared better in this troubled period. Indeed, to return to the apparent paradox of Palmyrene prosperity at a time of metropolitan crisis, crisis for the Roman Empire and prosperity at Palmyra are not mutually exclusive precisely because Palmyra for a few years became was a major part of the problem that the empire was facing.

Bibliography

- Andrade, N. J. (2018). *Zenobia: Shooting Star of Palmyra*. Oxford University Press.
- Bobou, O. & Raja, R. (2023). *Palmyrene Sarcophagi* (Studies in Palmyrene Archaeology and History, 10). Brepols.
- Brughmans, T., Kinnaird, T., Kristiansen, S. M., Lichtenberger, A., Raja, R., Seland, E. H., Simpson, I., & Stott, D. (2021). Urbanization and Riverine Hinterlands: A Proposal for an Integrative High-Definition and Multi-Scalar Approach to Understanding Ancient Cities and Their Dynamic Resources. *Journal of Urban Archaeology*, 4, 33–59. <https://doi.org/10.1484/J.JUA.5.126593>
- Campmany Jiménez, J., Romanowska, I., Raja, R., & Seland, E. H. (2022). Food Security in Roman Palmyra (Syria) in Light of Paleoclimatological Evidence and its Historical Implications. *PLoS one*, 17(9), e0273241. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0273241>
- De Blois, L. (2002). The Crisis of The Third Century AD in the Roman Empire: A Modern Myth? In L. de Blois & J. Rich (Eds.), *The Transformation of Economic Life Under the Roman Empire* (pp. 204–217). Brill.
- Erdkamp, P. (2019). War, Food, Climate Change, and the Decline of the Roman Empire. *Journal of Late Antiquity*, 12(2), 422–465. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jla.2019.0021>
- Harper, K. (217). *The Fate of Rome. Climate, Disease and the End of an Empire*. Princeton University Press.
- Harper, K. (2021). *Plagues Upon the Earth*. Princeton University Press.
- Hartmann, U. (2001). *Das Palmyrenische Teilreich*. Franz Steiner.
- Hartmann, U. (2024). Palmyra and the Third-Century Crisis. In R. Raja (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Palmyra* (pp. 143–160). Oxford University Press.
- Huebner, S. R. (2021). The ‘Plague of Cyprian’: A Revised View of the Origin and Spread of a 3rd-C. CE Pandemic. *Journal of Roman archaeology*, 34(1), 151–174. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1047759421000349>
- Intagliata, E. E. (2018). *Palmyra After Zenobia, 273–750: An Archaeological and Historical Reappraisal*. Oxbow.
- Liebeschuetz, W. (2007). Was There a Crisis of the Third Century. In O. Hekster, G. de Kleijn, & D. Slootjes (Eds.), *Crises and the Roman Empire* (pp. 11–20). Brill.
- Maksymiuk, K. (2015). *Geography of Roman-Iranian Wars: Military Operations of Rome and Sasanian Iran*. Instytut Historii i Stosunków Międzynarodowych Uniwersytetu Przyrodniczo Humanistycznego w Siedlcach.
- Potter, D. (2004). *The Roman Empire at Bay: AD 180–395*. Routledge.
- Raja, R. (2022). *Pearl of the Desert: A History of Palmyra*. Oxford University Press.
- Raja, R., Bobou, O., & Romanowska, I. (2021). Three Hundred Years of Palmyrene History: Unlocking Archaeological Data for Studying Past Societal Transformations. *PLoS one*, 16(11), e0256081. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0256081>
- Raja, R., & Seland, E. H. (2024). Palmyra: At the Crossroads of the Ancient World. *Journal of Archaeological Research*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10814-024-09203-8>
- Romanowska, I., Bobou, O., & Raja, R. (2021). Reconstructing The Social, Economic and Demographic Trends of Palmyra’s Elite from Funerary Data. *Journal of Archaeological Science*, 133, 105431. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jas.2021.105432>
- Romanowska, I., Jimenez, J. C., Bobou, O., & Raja, R. (2021). Evaluating the Environmental Kuznets Curves through Archaeological Data: A Conceptual and Theoretical Framework. *Journal of Urban Archaeology*, 4, 61–97. <https://doi.org/10.1484/J.JUA.5.126594>

- Ruffing, K. (2023). Crisis, What crisis? Die Wirtschaft des Imperium Romanum im 3. Jh. n. Chr. in der neueren Forschung. In S. Fink, & R. Rollinger (Eds.), *'Krisen' und 'Untergänge' als historisches Phänomen* (pp. 249–269). Springer.
- Seland, E. H. (2016). *Ships of the Desert And Ships of the Sea. Palmyra in the World Trade of the First Three Centuries CE*. Harrassowitz.
- Smith, A. (2013). *Roman Palmyra. Identity, Community and State Formation*. Oxford University Press.
- Sommer, M. (2008). Der Löwe von Tadmor: Palmyra und der Unwahrscheinliche Aufstieg des Septimius Odaenathus. *Historische Zeitschrift*, 287, 281–318.
- Sommer, M. (2018). *Palmyra. A History*. Routledge.
- Southern, P. (2008). *Empress Zenobia: Palmyra's Rebel Queen*. Continuum.

