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ZENOBIA – QUEEN OF PALMYRA



Zenobia, also known as Septimia Zenobia (Bat-Zabbai) was the Queen of the Palmyrene Empire from 267 to 272 CE. She is widely known as the great warrior-queen who captured Roman provinces and conquered Egypt during the period of the Crisis of the Third Century. This era was characterised by constant civil war as various Roman generals battled for control of the empire.

Born in 240 CE in Palmyra, Syria, Zenobia was given the name Julia Aurelia Zenobia. During this time, Syria was a Roman province and as such, she was a Roman citizen as her father's family had been granted citizenship earlier. It was said that she was either of Ptolemaic (Greco-Egyptian) or Arabic descent. Zenobia was educated in Latin and Greek, and was fluent in Aramaic and Egyptian.

In 258 CE, Zenobia married Septimius Odaenathus who was an influential member of Palmyrene society. His exact position is unknown, but it was believed that he was essentially Roman Governor of Syria, and was bestowed with the title 'King of Kings.' Odaenathus had one son from his first marriage, Hairan, his presumed heir. Around 260-266, Zenobia gave birth to Vaballathus, Odaenathus' second son. By 267 AD, Odaenathus and Hairan were assassinated, resulting in Vaballathus' appointment as King of Palmyra and Zenobia became

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a regent as her son was a minor. As Rome was facing the Crisis of the Third Century, it was a great opportunity for Zenobia to extend the Palmyrene rule.

In 270, Zenobia sent her General, Zabdas to claim the Roman province of Egypt, and with support from their Egyptian ally, Timagenes, the Palmyrenes were successful. To consolidate her position in Egypt, Zenobia claimed that she was a descendent of Cleopatra. Zenobia also led her army as a “warrior queen.” She then led her troops into Anatolia, defeating Roman territory as far west as Ancyra. Consequently, Zenobia conquered Palestine, Syria and Lebanon, through military skill and propaganda, creating an empire independent of Rome. Conquering most of Asia Minor, the area was a valuable trade route territory for the Romans. Zenobia had coins issues with her likeness and others with her son’s.

The Palmyrene Empire was recognised by the new Roman emperor, Aurelian who was seeking to solidify the empire. Consequently, Zenobia and Vaballathus fled to Palmyra, where they prepared to defend the city. Zenobia and her son attempted to flee but were captured by Aurelian. There are mixed accounts as to Zenobia’s fate following this.

Several lessons can be taken from Zenobia’s leadership. Some include:

Vision

Zenobia accompanied Odaenathus in expanding Palmyra’s territory, in an effort to protect Rome’s interests. When Odaenathus died and Zenobia rose to power, she embraced the vision of the future that her husband had set out. This included upholding her late husband’s policies.

Ambition

Ruling on behalf of her son, Zenobia demonstrated her ambition by assuming the imperial titles of Augustus for Vaballathus and Augusta for herself as such titles were privilege of the royal family of Rome. Zenobia was determined to continue with the goals of greatness and expansion, surprising the world when she invaded Egypt. Zenobia then went on to conquer the ancient country, subsequently making herself Queen of Egypt. She was also ambitious in that she worked to build herself up to be a mythical person.

Bravery/Courage

Zenobia actively participated in military campaigns, riding alongside her generals and marching long distances on foot with her troops. Apparently she could hunt as well as any man, accompanying Odaenathus on hunting trips. As a clever diplomat and military strategist, Zenobia tested the authority of the Roman Empire in the east. She led her army to defeat parts of Jordan, Turkey, Syria and Egypt to extend the Palmyrene Empire. This was particularly unheard of for a woman during this time, demonstrating bravery and courage.

Not many women in history, particularly in Ancient history, have achieved as many defeats as Zenobia. As Rome’s enemy, Zenobia is the greatest woman to have challenged Rome.

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