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Rex Winsbury, *Zenobia of Palmyra: History, Myth and the Neo-classical Imagination*. London: Duckworth, 2010. Pp. 198. ISBN 9780715638538. \$29.95 (pb).

**Reviewed by Diederik Burgersdijk, University of Amsterdam
(d.w.p.burgersdijk@uva.nl)**

[Preview](#)

The tricolon in the subtitle of the book under review, *History, Myth and the Neo-Classical Imagination*, shows in decreasing order of importance the elements of which the book consists. Yet the order in which the elements are treated is reversed: Rex Winsbury starts off with a prologue about a theme from the nineteenth-century reception of the third century Syrian queen Zenobia, which purports to introduce the reader to the legend she has become. This legend is mainly based on the fictitious account that the *Historia Augusta*, a late antique series of imperial biographies of unknown date and author, provides of Zenobia's life in the book about the 'Thirty Tyrants' who were active as pretenders to the throne during the reign of the emperor Gallienus (253-268 AD). Winsbury is vaguely aware of the perils accompanying the use of this questionable source, but is forced, by want of alternatives, to base the description of his Zenobia on the *HA*, which is the fate of every historian in search of this unknown but highly popular character. For the most part, the book is devoted to circumstantial historical events in the crisis of the mid-third century; at the same time, this focus represents the most valuable part of the work.

Rex Winsbury has added another book to the steadily expanding Zenobian library. Since Richard Stoneman's *Palmyra and its Empire* (1992) (BMCR [2004.03.14](#)) and Pat Southern's *Empress Zenobia* (2008), along with numerous other publications of scholarly, encyclopedic and novelistic nature, progress in the scholarship concerning the elusive desert queen is proceeding, albeit the ultimate goal, a clear and unambiguous picture of Zenobia and her times, will never be achieved. Apart from the unreliability of the *HA*, this is primarily due to the scarceness of contemporary sources and the unreliability of later historiographical accounts. However dearly we would wish to know Zenobia better, we simply have to accept that we will never acquire more than some superficial information. Take, for example, Zenobia's ultimate fate after the capture of her city in the Syrian desert, Palmyra: although the majority of sources, consequently written centuries after the events, state that she was led in triumph in Rome, we simply do not know if this actually happened. A majority

of sources might be invoked to prove that Zenobia was taken to Rome, but as long as the dependency of one source on another is not determined, conclusions about the historical events can only be tentative.

The important task of establishing the value of and the relationships between the historiographical sources is precisely what Winsbury fails to manage. Moreover, Winsbury seems to be unaware of the scholarship on his most important source, the *HA*, done in the past hundred and twenty years. Although a certain Hermann 'Dassau' is mentioned on p.174n32, the revolutionary thesis that this German scholar (whose proper name is Dessau) put forward in 1889 does not appear to play any role in Winsbury's treatment; and so on p. 77 it is stated that the *HA* was written during Constantine's time – while on p.188 the *Scriptores Historiae Augustae* are dated 'after 360'. Dessau was not the first one to unmask the author of the *HA* as a 'Fälscher', as he also drew on observations made by predecessors, but he did establish a *terminus post quem* in the last quarter of the fourth century and hypothesized a single author. It was sir Ronald Syme who, in two major publications from 1968 and 1971, shed a further light on the playful mind of the author, calling his literary product 'a garden of delights', written by a 'rogue scholar' (a better equivalent for Fälscher than Winsbury's 'forger') meant to be enjoyed by the reader.¹ Winsbury would have been wise to consult at least the major works of the enormous volume of literature about the *HA*, for example Paschoud's comprehensive commentary on the life of Aurelian in the Budé series, not to speak of his landmark edition of Zosimus,² in order to get better hold of his beloved subject.

Although Winsbury's contemplations about the differences between Latin *inventio* and the English 'invention' on p.27, concerning the method of the author of the *HA*, are perfectly acceptable, it is remarkable that he uses the term 'invention' over and over again, as if his theoretical disquisitions were only added in the final stage of writing. A further drawback is the careless way in which Winsbury quotes his sources - the classics in translation and modern authors alike. Different parts from, e.g., Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* are presented as one continuous fragment: in one case more than hundred words are left out without a single clue. In this fragment and others, substantial passages are sometimes condensed to a single word between square brackets, while these same brackets serve in other cases to indicate the author's own commentary. The instances in which these quoting techniques are applied are too numerous to mention – and, besides, hardly invite verification. For a second edition, the author should rather be advised simply to paraphrase the quotes and to refer to his sources in footnotes, which would, apart from the fact that this method corresponds with approved standards, furthermore add to the unity and style of the text.

The most valuable parts of Winsbury's book are to be found in the middle chapters, in which the overture to the fall of Palmyra is treated, wrapped in a description of the history of Persia, Palmyra and the Roman Empire in the mid-third century crisis. Although the style is somewhat flat and the information is presented in a straightforward, sometimes encyclopedic way, the author shows

affinity with historical questions concerning the third century. His main argument with regard to the subject of the book (from which the narration diverges all too often) is that Zenobia tried to uphold an independent reign within the Roman Empire, seeking to be accepted by the Roman emperor as a co-ruler. The question of the titles granted to Zenobia's husband Odenathus is thoroughly reconstructed, ending in the conclusion that not much can be inferred as to Odenathus' relation with the Roman monarch Gallienus: Odenathus, like Zenobia, appears to be just one of the other pretenders taking profit from the chaotic situation in the Roman empire in the mid-third century. The weak point in the reconstruction of events is that Zenobia's son Vaballathus, whose position can be fairly well reconstructed with the help of considerable coin evidence, is almost entirely neglected. The question whether Vaballathus was supposed to inherit Odenathus' position, thus providing an excuse for Zenobia to act as his regent, is at best superficially touched upon. In establishing his viewpoint on Zenobia's final goal, Winsbury attaches much value to a – undoubtedly unhistorical – statement by Zenobia as delivered by the author of the *HA*: in her biography in the book of *Triginta Tyranni* (30.23) she declares, as a captive before her conqueror the emperor Aurelian, that she envisaged sharing power with her western counterpart queen Victoria, *si facultas locorum pateretur*. Winsbury translates this phrase as 'if distribution of territory allowed it.' It should however be questioned whether these words, if interpreted rightly, can be produced as evidence for Zenobia's ambition to share power. Chastagnol (1994),³ another unnamed authority with regard to the *HA*, translates *facultas locorum* as 'les distances de l'empire', while Magie in the Loeb Classical Library (*HA* vol. III, 1932), to whom Winsbury normally has recourse, interprets the words as 'supply of lands'. The formula hints at the vastness of the Roman empire and the impossibility of ruling the entire empire even under a shared emperorship, not the distribution of land between two pretenders. Winsbury's idea about co-regency is supported by the recently revived idea (see for example Hekster 2008⁴) that the disintegration of the empire in different territories might have added to the survival of the empire over a relatively long period, which makes perfect sense.

Some remarks about the myth of Zenobia, to which the beginning and the end of the book are devoted, may be in order. First of all, it is probably Petrarch in his *Trionfi*, not Boccaccio, who introduced the Zenobia-theme in modern European literature. Furthermore, one would like to know more about some specific topics, such as what happened exactly with Zenobia's fame in the second decade of the nineteenth century, as Rossini did not write the opera *Aureliano in Palmira* in 1813 (p.21, a common mistake), because the first performance had already taken place on 26 December, 1812. This is not without significance, because Lady Hester Stanhope's triumphal entrance as a *Zenobia rediviva* was in March 1813 (Winsbury: 'the same year as Rossini's opera, not without coincidence') – the relation between the two events remains unclear. Thirdly, Winsbury overestimates the role of her Anglo-Saxon reception (p.22): many books and novels have appeared in France⁵ and in the Near East, with as its most characteristic example *Zenobia, The Queen of Palmyra* by the Syrian former minister of defence, general Moustafa Tlass (2000), in which Zenobia is

portrayed as a national Syrian heroine fighting against the western occupier Aurelian. With regard to antique as well as modern literature, Near Eastern literature, which offers fascinatingly divergent traditions, is entirely neglected – a real pity for a book that claims to treat the ‘Myth’ of Zenobia.

Although the historiographical foundation of Winsbury’s Zenobia leaves a lot to be desired, the book still deserves a place in the expanding *bibliotheca Zenobiana*. In spite of the many repetitions,⁶ contradictions,⁷ and numerous errors and misprints,⁸ Winsbury’s book, the second one with a classical topic (see BMCR [2010.03.21](#)), is informative and pleasantly readable. Therefore, it is all the more regrettable that proper proof-reading has apparently not been executed. A second printing may put right many of its patent flaws, while further study of the secondary literature about the sources would be advisable. There is no doubt that Winsbury, who knows his subject intimately and succeeds in passing his enthusiasm to the reader, will not shy away from such a task.

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Notes:

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[2.](#) Paschoud, F. (ed.) *Zosime. Historia Nova*, Budé, Paris 1971-1989; *Histoire Auguste, tome 5.1: Vies d’Aurélien, Tacite*, Paris 1996; Paschoud’s longed for study of the *Triginta Tyranni* is about to appear.

[3.](#) Chastagnol, A. (ed.) *Histoire Auguste. Les empereurs Romains des IIe et IIIe siècles*, Paris 1994.

[4.](#) Hekster, O. *Rome and Its Empire, AD 193-284. Debates and Documents in*

Ancient History, Edinburgh 2008, see BMCR [2009.03.39](#).

[5.](#) E.g. A.B. Daniel, *Reine de Palmyra*, 2 volumes, 2005 and A. Maalouf, *Les jardins de lumière*, 1991.

[6.](#) The golden chains in which Zenobia was led in Aurelian's triumph appear in at least three places in the book, p.13, 24, 136-7; the languages she speaks - Greek, Palmyrene, Egyptian, sometimes Latin, sometimes not -, not to speak of the double featuring of Harriet Hosmer's statue of Zenobia on p. 12 and 147.

[7.](#) See for example the rejection – 'surely irrelevant' - and acceptance – 'may owe something' / 'may, or may not' - of the use of Tacitus and Juvenalis on p. 30, 151 and 174n6; on page 25 Zenobia suffers from *hubris*, which is, admittedly after a 'reassessment', denied on p.154, etc.

[8.](#) A *florilegium*: p. 34: *colchis* > *cochlis*, or eventually *coclis* (cf. *HA T* 30.14); p.43: *Palmua* > *Palmyra*; p.40-1: the alternation between *Hairan* and *Haeranes* (cf. p.152); p.59: 30 years > 32 years; *Sapor* 242 > 240; p.62 *wasting* > *wasted*; p.83 *Caracalla* 216 > 217; *Elagabalus* 217 > 218; p.85: *Victoria* > *Vitruvia*; p.89 *Probatas*: only in *HA* (*Claudius* 11); p.96: *Cassianus* > *Cassianus*; p.108: *Alemanni* > *Alamanni*; p.114: *Mexantius* > *Maxentius*; p.173n9: *Jamieson* > *Jameson*; p.174n32: *Dassau* > *Dessau*; p.175n41: *Palmyrische* > *Palmyrenische* p.174n10: 30.13. > 30.13-19; p.177n2: I wonder who the scholars are who place *Valerian's* capture in 259 or even 258; p.178n18: 3.9. > 3.9.4; p.179: n27: 56 > 5.6; p.179n1: why 2.10.7?; n11: *Magie's* translation is not followed here; the reading of *occulte* instead of *consulte* is based on wishful thinking; p.180n36: *Potter* 2004, 270 (see also p.168 *Winsbury*); p.183n6: 16.10 > 16.10.8; p.187: *Aufstieg* > *Aufstieg*; *Eutropius*: not later than 380 > probably 369–370; p.189 *ad Cizek*: *Aurelian* > *Aurélien*; *ad Hekster*: *Crisis* > *Crises*; p.191 *ad* websites: <http://www.stichtingzenobia.nl/>.

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