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Zenobia, the Great Jewish Queen? Re-analysing Zenobia's Attitude to Monotheism, Judaism and Its Reasonings

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Summary: The current article wishes to reassess the Christian texts mentioning Queen Zenobia's potential affinity to Judaism, or her conversion to Judaism. It will be shown that the claims against the reliability of these texts are deficient or inaccurate. Furthermore, it will be clarified that she was not Jewish from birth. Instead, the sources indicate that she had a special relationship with monotheism, and Judaism in particular, and that she may have wished to convert to Judaism or did so in secret. The reasoning for this action and her relationship with Judaism will be examined while considering her politically precarious position, as well as the place of monotheism and Judaism in Palmyra, the Roman East and the Roman Army. Through this, the current article wishes to provide a better, more accurate presentation of Zenobia's religious inclinations, how she used and manoeuvred between an ambiguous monotheism and Judaism in order to gain power and support, and what was her *raison d'être* for such a move and choice.

Keywords: Zenobia, Palmyra, Conversion, Monotheism, Ancient Judaism

Zenobia of Palmyra is one of the most famous female leaders in history. Her story sparks the imagination,¹ as she attempted to challenge the hegemony of the Roman Empire. This fascination with Zenobia tends to centre on her political exploits and the expansion of her power, with relatively little attention paid to the personal qualities and beliefs which may have facilitated her early successes, or were employed by her in their attainment. Accordingly, the current article wishes to take a different route to examine and try to answer whether Queen Zenobia of Palmyra ever converted to Judaism, and if she did, what her potential motives were for such

1 Dirven 2021, 256.

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an action. Despite the influx of books,² and articles,³ on Zenobia in the last two decades, only a few pages were dedicated to her Jewishness and none of the publications presented nor discussed all the available ancient texts.⁴

Her religious inclinations, or her possible conversion, must be examined in the context of her success, or possibly as one of its reasons, as many leaders consciously decide to show affiliation or align themselves to certain faiths and historical figures to further their goals. For example, Zenobia identified herself with Cleopatra when invading and controlling parts of Egypt.⁵ Cleopatra herself, like other members of the Ptolemaic dynasty, took the title of Pharaoh, a deified monarch, i.e. a living god. Furthermore, Zenobia possibly mimicked Cleopatra and other Hellenistic rulers by filling her court with philosophers, such as Cassius Longinus, who will be noteworthy to the article's debate.⁶ Similar to many other rulers in history, Zenobia juggled numerous identities to achieve support from different groups.⁷ Therefore, the current article will suggest that her relationship with monotheism, specifically Judaism and Christianity, needs to be examined through this prism.

The texts referencing her Jewishness or conversion were mentioned and partially analysed in previous publications, both in the framework of the debate around Paul of Samosata,⁸ and concerning Zenobia herself.⁹ However, a thorough examination of all the available evidence and an attempt to reconcile between them,¹⁰ was never conducted. Furthermore, there has been no attempt to understand the reasons behind the wording and composition of these texts, nor has anyone endeavoured to understand Zenobia's religious inclinations, intentions and underlying reasoning.

Nevertheless, before attempting to examine Zenobia's conversion, it is important to highlight the two main arguments against her being Jewish from birth or converting to Judaism at a later age. Firstly, all the sources discussing her poten-

2 In books, the only pages dealing with her Jewish inclinations are: Southern 2008, 86; Andrade 2018, 187.

3 In articles, the only pages dealing with her Jewish inclinations are: Millar 1971, 12–13; Teixidor 2005, 218; Kaizer 2010, 118; when a book chapter or a general short paper dealt with Zenobia, the issue of her possible conversion would usually not be mentioned at all. For example: Dirven 2021.

4 See the two previous notes.

5 Accordingly, the Greek rhetor, Callinicus of Petra, referred to her in this way in his history of Alexandria. See: Millar 1971, 5; Southern 2008, 116; Andrade 2018, 188; Dirven 2021, 263.

6 Bobou – Raja – Romanowska 2021, 155.

7 Nakamura 1993, 135.

8 Millar 1971, 11–13.

9 It received only three sentences in: Andrade 2018, 187.

10 Regarding the fact that many texts mention Zenobia, yet do not need reconciliation, see: Steyn 2017, 721.

tial Jewish identity are Christian texts, with the majority of them, except for one, mentioning this in the context of Paul of Samosata.¹¹ He was an archbishop hailing from Antioch, whose theological views aligned with Monarchianism,¹² a doctrine that accentuated God as one, akin to Aryanism, in contrast to the Catholic Church's doctrine of the Holy Trinity.¹³ As a result of his beliefs, he was deemed a heretic by other Christian denominations. Secondly, there is an utter absence of any reference to her conversion in either the Jerusalem or the Babylonian Talmud,¹⁴ which were the main scriptures of Rabbinic Judaism in the 4th to 7th centuries CE.¹⁵

In an attempt to solve these questions and issues, the current article intends to start with a very short general introduction to Queen Zenobia's world, followed by an analysis of the Christian texts which mention her Jewishness or conversion to Judaism. This analysis will be conducted chronologically, dealing with each of the texts while determining their accuracy and implications. Secondly, an examination of the Rabbinic attitude to Zenobia, and their references to her, will be scrutinised to understand why they did not mention her possible conversion. This will be conducted alongside a presentation on the presence and impact of Jews and Judaism in Palmyra and other regions of the Near East. Finally, this article will examine the significance of Monotheism, particularly Judaism, as a means for garnering support and manpower for her wars. This will be accomplished by analysing the phenomenon of Jewish military service in the Roman Army during the 3rd century. Through all these points of analysis and debates, the present article aims to provide a comprehensive and precise understanding of Zenobia's beliefs. It will highlight how she skilfully used and manoeuvred between ambiguous Monotheism and Judaism to gain power and support and examine her 'raison d'être' for such moves and choices.

11 Regarding Paul, see: Scheidweiler 1955; Norris 1984, 59–67.

12 For attempts to understand his beliefs, see: Bardy 1929; de Riedmatten 1952; Sample 1977; Norris 1984.

13 Norris 1984, 52–56, 58.

14 See for example: Andrade 2018, 187.

15 I completely agree with Eliav: "For generations, these rabbis functioned as individual scholars, teachers with no sense of a larger community beyond the small number of students they had attracted [...] The so-called 'rabbinic movement' did not produce the Mishnah; rather, the creation of the Mishnah began to create the rabbinic movement": Eliav 2023, 13; as is clear, this group of perpetually disagreeing rabbis cannot be defined as a movement. However, it is necessary to define this type of Judaism, which became increasingly popular in later periods. Therefore, the term Rabbinic Judaism in reference to this type of Judaism will be used within this article.

Zenobia's World

In order to debate Queen Zenobia's Jewish status, it is important to first understand who she was, the period in which she lived and the situation of the Roman Empire at the time. In the 3rd century CE, the Roman Empire was battling both internal and external forces which rendered the empire weak.¹⁶ Germanic tribes were pressuring the western frontier of the Empire along the whole of the Danube, while Shapur I, King of Persia, dealt numerous crushing defeats to the Romans on the Eastern frontier of the empire.¹⁷ Furthermore, the empire lost Gaul, Iberia and Britain when Postumus revolted and created the Gallic Empire in 260 CE.¹⁸

Odaenathus, the King of Palmyra and Zenobia's husband, helped the Romans to stabilise their eastern front, and even conducted campaigns against the Persians. There are debates regarding the extent of the autonomy he achieved for Palmyra,¹⁹ and how much territory was under active Palmyrene control before his death in 267 CE.²⁰ Nevertheless, it seems his wife, Queen Zenobia, was the *de facto* creator of the Palmyrene Empire, which at its height controlled territories from Asia minor (modern day Turkey) in the north, to the heartland of Egypt in the south.²¹ Zenobia eventually ruled most of the Roman East, yet only for a short time as she was defeated by Emperor Aurelian in his swift military campaign of 272 CE.²²

The Christian Testimonies

Now that the stage is set, it is necessary to examine the texts that discuss Zenobia and her possible Jewishness chronologically. The earliest source on her Jewish identity was written by Athanasius of Alexandria in his *Historia Arianorum*, where he mentions her Jewishness in relation to Paul of Samosata:

Πότε οὖν ἠκούσθη τοσαύτη παρανομία; πότε τι τοιοῦτον κἂν ἐν διωγμῷ γέγονε κακόν; Ἕλληνες γεγόνασιν οἱ πρότερον διώξαντες, ἀλλ' οὐκ εἰς τὰς ἐκκλησίας εἰσήνεγκαν τὰ εἰδῶλα.

¹⁶ Regarding the crises of the third century, see: Alföldy 1974; John 2008; Ando 2012; Olshanetsky 2024a, 279–280.

¹⁷ Mackintosh 1973, 181–183; Caldwell 2018; on the struggles between Rome and Persia, see: Dignas – Winter 2007.

¹⁸ Regarding the Gallic Empire, see: Drinkwater 1987; Bourne 2000.

¹⁹ Millar 1971, 8–9.

²⁰ Regarding Odaenathus' death, see: Andrade 2018, 143–147.

²¹ Millar 1971, 9–10.

²² Regarding Queen Zenobia's downfall, see: Millar 1971, 9; Andrade 2018, 191–211.

Τουδαία ἦν Ζηνοβία καὶ Παύλου προέστη τοῦ Σαμοσατέως, ἀλλ' οὐ δέδωκε τὰς ἐκκλησίας τοῖς
Τουδαίοις εἰς συναγωγὰς.²³

“When was ever such iniquity heard of? when was such an evil deed ever perpetrated, even in times of persecution? They were heathens who persecuted formerly; but they did not bring their images into the Churches. Zenobia, was a Jewess, and a supporter of Paul of Samosata; but she did not give up the Churches to the Jews for Synagogues.”²⁴

It is important to note that he discusses Zenobia not in the harshest tone as he reveals she did not convert the churches into synagogues. This text also implies that the members of the church had issues with Zenobia's belief, not her gender,²⁵ and had even more concerns with the types of Christian beliefs that flourished in her domain, such as Monarchianism, the sect to which Paul of Samosata belonged. Furthermore, this is one of the texts where it is suggested that she may have been Jewish by birth, as her conversion is not stated. However, despite such testimony, past scholars argued that Zenobia was not Jewish from birth, but she might have had inclinations towards Judaism and possibly even converted.²⁶ Although this is the earliest text on this matter, it is vital to remember that Athanasius lived and wrote many decades after the events in the text.²⁷

Due to the importance of Paul of Samosata to this current debate, a few words of note regarding this figure are required. As can be learnt from Eusebius, Paul of Samosata eventually succeeded Demetrianus as bishop of Antioch in 260 CE.²⁸ During his term, Paul was accused of being a heretic and was eventually declared as such around 269 CE. Yet, he refused to accept the ruling and stayed in office, leading his opponents to make a successful petition against him to Aurelian (r. 270–275 CE).²⁹ It was suggested that one of the reasons Aurelian agreed to rule on a Christian matter, and why Christians petitioned him, was because Paul was considered one of Zenobia's followers and a member of her court, and they felt that Aurelian would be favourable in acting against him.

The second relevant text was written by Philastrius of Brescia in his discussions regarding heresy published around 384 CE.³⁰ In this text, which was written

²³ Athan. hist. Ar. 71.

²⁴ Athan. hist. Ar. 71. Transl. Scharf series II, Vol. IV, p. 788, with some amendments of mine.

²⁵ Many researchers often automatically try to connect the dislike of certain ancient rulers to their gender, for example: Steyn 2017, 722.

²⁶ Andrade 2018, 187.

²⁷ Regarding Athanasius and his beliefs, see: Barnes 1993; Farag 2020.

²⁸ Eus. HE. 8,27–30; see also: Millar 1971, 1.

²⁹ Millar 1971, 11–12; Slootjes 2011, 111.

³⁰ Regarding Philastrius and his writings, see: Szram 2017, 34, 44–46; Gassman 2021, 83–84, 86.

a few decades after Athanasius writings, Philastrius declared that Paul of Samosata assisted Zenobia in her conversion to Judaism:

[...] *unde et Zenobiam quandam reginam in oriente tunc temporis ipse docuit iudaeizare* [...] ³¹

“[...] also taught Zenobia, at that time a queen in the East, to become a Jew [...]”

Unlike Athanasius’ testimony, which was ambiguous on Zenobia being Jewish by birth or whether she converted to Judaism, Philastrius clearly states that Zenobia converted to Judaism. Moreover, Zenobia is described as a follower of Paul of Samosata (maybe because of her Jewishness) in Athanasius’ story, yet in Philastrius’ account, he was the reason for her conversion. Regarding this narrative, Millar even alleged: “We cannot actually disprove the third version of the story, that of Philastrius, that Paul influenced Zenobia in the direction of Judaism.” ³² However, unlike what was declared by Millar, it is improbable that Paul was the reason, or the vessel, for her conversion to Judaism. As he was certainly not Jewish, the story may have confused between two different perceptions and stories. Nevertheless, what is certain is that it was commonly believed that Zenobia favoured Judaism, which possibly created a good foundation for her relationship with Paul, as his Christian beliefs were not as dissimilar from Judaism compared to the beliefs of other Christian sects.

A few years after Philastrius, John Chrysostom, ³³ blamed Zenobia for being the cause of the heresy of Paul of Samosata: ³⁴

οὐδὲ γὰρ ἀγνοῶν, ἀλλὰ καὶ σφόδρα εἰδὼς ἡμάρτανε, ταῦτὸν παθὼν τοῖς Ἰουδαίοις. καθάπερ γὰρ ἐκεῖνοι πρὸς ἀνθρώπους ὁρῶντες, τὸ τῆς πίστεως προὔδωκαν ὕγιες, εἰδότες μὲν ὅτι αὐτός ἐστιν ὁ μονογενὴς Υἱὸς τοῦ Θεοῦ, διὰ δὲ τοὺς ἄρχοντας οὐχ ὁμολογοῦντες, ἵνα μὴ ἀποσυνάγωγοι γένωνται· οὕτω καὶ τοῦτον γυναικὶ τινι χαριζόμενον, τὴν σωτηρίαν φασὶν ἀποδόσθαι τὴν ἑαυτοῦ. ³⁵

“For he erred not ignorantly but with full knowledge, being in the same case as the Jews. For as they, looking to men, gave up sound faith, knowing that he was the only-begotten Son of God, but not confessing Him, because of their rulers, lest they should be cast out of the synagogue; so it is said that he (Paul), to gratify a certain woman (Zenobia), sold his own salvation.” ³⁶

³¹ Philastrius, *Diversarum haereseon liber* 36,64.

³² Millar 1971, 13.

³³ Regarding John Chrysostom and his writings, see: Liebeschuetz 2011, 1–6, 97–264.

³⁴ He was the subject of two synods held at Antioch in around 264 and 268/9, the last also condemned him as a heretic. See: Millar 1971, 1.

³⁵ Ioh. Chrys. hom. VIII. John i. 9.

³⁶ Ioh. Chrys. hom. VIII. John i. 9. Transl. Scharf series I, Vol. XIV, pp. 64–65.

This text suggests the Zenobia was Jewish, yet it is important to consider that this text may be inaccurate. Paul was already accused of heresy in 264 CE, and several times after, before being formally declared as a heretic in the council of 269 CE,³⁷ well before the Palmyrene Empire seized control of Antioch and Zenobia was its sole ruler.³⁸ Moreover, it is highly unlikely Zenobia was Jewish by birth.³⁹ Nonetheless, this text, like others, continues to associate Zenobia with Judaism, thus suggesting there may be truth to this theory.

The testimony of Theodoret of Cyrus from the middle of the 5th century,⁴⁰ similarly blames Zenobia for Paul of Samosata's fall into heresy and claims that Zenobia held Jewish beliefs. Yet, it is unclear from this text whether she was Jewish from birth or converted:

Παῦλος δὲ ὁ Σαμοσατεὺς τῆς μὲν Ἀντιοχείων ἐπίσκοπος ἦν, Ζηνοβίας δὲ κατ' ἐκείνον τὸν καιρὸν τοπαρχούσης (Πέρσαι γὰρ Ῥωμαίους νενικηκότες ταύτη παρέδωσαν τὴν τῆς Συρίας καὶ Φοινίκης ἡγεμονίαν) εἰς τὴν Ἀρτέμωνος ἐξώκειλεν αἵρεσιν, ταύτῃ νομίζων θεραπεύειν ἐκείνην τὰ Ἰουδαίων φρονοῦσαν.⁴¹

"Paul of Samosata was bishop of Antioch. During that time Zenobia was the ruler (for the Persians, having defeated the Romans, handed authority over Syria and Phoenicia to her). [Paul] fell in with the heresy of Artemon, thinking that by this he would do service to that [woman i.e. Zenobia] which held Jewish beliefs."⁴²

Once again, Zenobia's Jewish belief is mentioned in the same breath as Paul of Samosata, although in this account, Paul is said to have fallen to the heresy of Artemon (or Artemas).⁴³ This makes the story peculiar and illogical as if Zenobia preferred Judaism, why would the belief in Artemon help Paul gain Zenobia's favour? Furthermore, as stated previously, Paul was accused as a heretic long before Zenobia was in sole power, or Antioch was under her control, and therefore would not have "fallen into heresy" for Queen Zenobia's sake. This confusion between different faiths and sects in these texts, and the melding of different stories, highlights the problematic nature of the Christian sources on Queen Zenobia's Jewish identity, rendering the pursuit of truth more challenging.

Nevertheless, numerous members of different Christian circles evidently associated Zenobia with Judaism, often in connection with Paul of Samosata. Thus, there

37 Millar 1971, 13.

38 Norris saw this as an irrefutable argument: Norris 1984, 59–60.

39 With regards to John Chrysostom's attitude to the Jews, see: Wilken 1983.

40 Regarding Theodoret of Cyrus, his life and writings: Pasztori-Kupan 2006; Clayton 2007.

41 Theodoret, *Haereticarum Fabularum Compendium* 2:8.

42 Theodoret, *Haereticarum Fabularum Compendium* 2:8 (Transl. Pasztori-Kupan 2006, 208).

43 Millar 1971, 17.

is a likelihood that there is an element of truth to these accounts and anecdotes. But what part of these stories are true? How reliable is the connection between her and Judaism? The association of Paul with Judaism could be just slander but, as Millar pointed out, scholars:

“[...] cannot prove that Paul was not influenced by members of the substantial Jewish community in Antioch; [...] But whatever was said in later Christian literature about the Judaizing tendencies of Paul or his followers, this particular line of attack was not used, so far as we know, by his contemporaries. On the contrary, they clearly regarded his heresy as a revival of that of Artemon (or Artemas).”⁴⁴

The same can be said for a text in Syriac from around 664 CE, which blames Zenobia for Paul's heresy and so, may again be considered inaccurate as he was condemned as a heretic long before he joined her court:

“The cause of his downfall was his association with a woman the Persians had established over Syria and Phoenicia when they defeated the Romans; her name was Zenobia. As Paul wanted to please her and she was interested in all things concerning the Jews, he was led into the heresy of Artemon.”⁴⁵

It is interesting to note that the text once again implies that Paul went astray and became a heretic for Zenobia, who was interested in Judaism and may have wished to convert. This seems improbable, especially as the relation between the heresy of Artemon and Judaism appears dubious. It is plausible this statement may have been included due to a common Christian phrasing of Paul of Samosata's beliefs, as some later Christian writers considered his beliefs very similar to Judaism. For example, Epiphanius claimed that the difference between Paul's disciples and the Jews is that his disciples did not observe the Sabbath or practice circumcision.⁴⁶ However, similar to the previous texts, excluding Philastrius', what is integral to the debate is her affinity with Judaism which was independent of Paul's acts or heresy. Accordingly, the possibility that his unrelated heresy was confused with a different account of her religious preferences is valid, as this narrative must have originated from a specific context. Otherwise, if the story was fiction, it would be more logical for the author to claim Paul's heresy of Artemon was encouraged by Queen Zenobia's heresy of Artemon. Hence, this information, i.e. her Jewish inclination, came from a different source which was probably unconnected to Paul of Samosata.

⁴⁴ Millar 1971, 17.

⁴⁵ Teixidor 2005, 217; for the Syriac text, see: Brooks 1903, 58.

⁴⁶ Epiphanius, *Panarion* 65,2, 5; Millar 1971, 13.

What may be the most important text on the matter of her conversion was composed relatively late, and can be found in the *Bibliotheca* of Photios I of Constantinople.⁴⁷

φασί δὲ τὸν Δημοσθένην δ' καὶ κ' ἔτη γεγονότα τὸν περὶ τῶν ἀτελείων ἦτοι τὸν πρὸς Λεπτίνην φιλοπονήσασθαι λόγον, οὗ τὸ προοίμιον Λογγίνος μὲν ὁ κριτικὸς ἀγωνιστικὸν νομίζει· ἐπὶ Κλαυδίου δὲ οὗτος ἤκμαζε, καὶ τὰ πολλὰ συνηγωνίζετο Ζηνοβία τῇ τῶν Ὀσροηνῶν βασιλίδι, τὴν ἀρχὴν κατεχούση Ὀδενάθου τοῦ ἀνδρὸς αὐτῆς τετελευτηκότος, ἣν καὶ μεταβαλεῖν εἰς τὰ Ἰουδαίων ἔθη ἀπὸ τῆς Ἑλληνικῆς δεισιδαιμονίας παλαιὸς ἀναγράφει λόγος· ἀλλὰ γὰρ ὁ μὲν Λογγίνος τοιαύτην περὶ τοῦ προειρημένου προοίμιου ψῆρον ἐξάγει.⁴⁸

“They say that at the age of 24 Demosthenes worked on the discourse On the [tax] exemptions or Against Leptines, the exordium of which is considered as combative by the critic Longinus. Longinus lived under Claudius, and he often did legal business for Zenobia, queen of Osroene, who reigned after the death of her husband Odenathus. An old tradition reports that she adopted Jewish customs and abandoned pagan superstition. However, Longinus gave the opinion on the exordium that I mentioned. Others have wrongly said that the exordium is of a moralising type.”⁴⁹

This is the first text where Zenobia's conversion to Judaism is mentioned without discussing Paul of Samosata, and instead discusses her conversion to Judaism as part of a wider debate on the philosopher Longinus. Her association with the philosopher, who could have been a member of her court,⁵⁰ is attested by non-Christian sources, thereby lending credibility to Photios' text. Conversely, her connection to Samosata is solely discussed in Christian sources.⁵¹ The Photios' *Bibliotheca* heavily relies on the writings of ancient historians, such as Arian, Diodorus Sicilius, as well as others whose writings often survived only thanks to Photios' work, and so this text can be viewed as relatively reliable. This is strengthened by the fact that this extract corresponds, and may be supported by, what is written in other texts, such as the *Historia Augusta*.⁵² Thus, it is probable that Photios had an account/s mentioning her inclination towards Judaism that was independent of any Christian figure, including Paul of Samosata, and this source/s inspired the writing of all the previous Christian texts.

47 Regarding Photios I of Constantinople's life and writings, see: White 1981; Agachi 2012.

48 Photios, *Bibliotheca* 492a. Henry 1977, 60.

49 Photios, *Bibliotheca* 492a. Translation to English, with some amendments of mine, was taken from: https://www.tertullian.org/fathers/photius_copyright/photius_10bibliotheca.htm, last accessed 23.11.2024; for the Greek text, see: Henry 1977, 60.

50 SHA, Aurel. 30.

51 SHA, Aurel. 30; Bobou – Raja – Romanowska 2021, 155.

52 SHA, Aurel. 30.

To summarise, there are several inaccuracies in the texts which discuss Queen Zenobia's Jewish beliefs in relation to Paul, and thus it is possible to consider Photios' text as the most accurate. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that Photios' assertion regarding her Jewishness is cautious, taking care to mention that the source of this story is an ancient tradition. Nevertheless, he must have felt that this tradition has a strong basis in order to include it in his text. Furthermore, Photios was aware that Zenobia was not born Jewish, but rather had tendencies toward Judaism or converted to it, as seen in his depiction of her relationship with the religion. Accordingly, Miller (who never mentioned this text in his article) is correct regarding the nature of Zenobia's Jewish identity when he stated it was unlikely she was born a Jew.⁵³ However, the abundance of texts proclaiming Queen Zenobia's Jewish identity and/or conversion does indeed imply there is truth to this matter, although it is unclear whether she fully converted, or dabbled and adopted only some aspects of the religion into her life. Furthermore, it is likely that Photios' ancient source mentioning her penchant for Judaism, independently from any Christian figure including Paul of Samosata, inspired the previous Christian texts. In addition, this source may have been older and more accurate and may have been written in Zenobia's lifetime.

Zenobia and the Rabbis

Despite the abundance of discussions on Queen Zenobia's Jewish identity in Christian discourse, it is notable that a vital Jewish source does not infer or mention her Jewish identity: the Talmud.⁵⁴ In the discourse surrounding this matter, it is crucial to underscore the multifaceted landscape of Judaism during the 3rd century CE, emphasizing its rich diversity and dynamic manifestations, compared to modern-day Judaism. There were countless ancient Jewish sects,⁵⁵ where the most popular and incorrectly designated one was Hellenistic Judaism, which is a contentious term. However, the majority of Jews, who come from a diverse and culturally rich range of Jewish communities, fall under this category. Thus, it would be wise to suggest abandoning the term and simply referring to these individuals as Jews.⁵⁶

⁵³ Millar 1971, 13; similar things were said by others: Andrade 2018, 187.

⁵⁴ See for example: Andrade 2018, 187.

⁵⁵ There is a vast amount of literature on Jewish law, Jewish sects, and diversity in ancient Judaism. For someone who wishes to delve into the subject for the first time, the following three book chapters would be a good start, though they are only the tip of the iceberg: Burns 2020; Dohrmann 2020; Klawans 2020.

⁵⁶ This line of thought is in agreement with Eliav's latest book, and thus builds on his arguments: Eliav 2023.

This gains further traction when considering the common use of the term Hellenistic Judaism as a derogatory term, which denotes it as a lesser, wrong or impure form of Judaism. The dawn of this problematic terminology progressed from anachronistic perspectives originating from modern Judaism, which is mainly composed of Orthodox schools of thought descended from the Rabbinic movement. The fact that the ancient Judaism of this silent majority died throughout the centuries does not justify relegating it to a status of inferiority.

While the complete substitution of “Judaism” for the term “Hellenistic Judaism” proves impractical due to entrenched terminology, the adoption of the term “Conventional Judaism” represents a pragmatic initial step towards rectifying this. Through a gradual evolution of terminology, the aim is to replace the divisive designation with the more encompassing and accurate labels of “Judaism” and “Jews” for this broader Jewish populace.

The Rabbis who wrote the Talmud had little influence outside Judaea/Palaestina and Babylon, i.e. modern-day Iraq, although their authority and status are debatable even in these two centres. The Rabbis and their followers suffered heavy losses during the Second Jewish Revolt in the 2nd century CE, and thus were fundamentally opposed to any attempts of rebellion against the Roman Empire. Since Queen Zenobia’s actions were essentially a revolt against the Empire, there was no incentive for the Rabbis to recognise or support her. Furthermore, the Rabbinic world was a profoundly patriarchal society and fiercely opposed the idea that pagans could convert to Judaism. If Zenobia was both a woman and a convert, the Rabbis would have seen her as an aberration, thus deeming her unsuited to lead the Jewish people.

This can be seen in several important debates regarding gentile conversion to Judaism, with strong opposition from the Rabbis towards the broad acceptance of converts into the Rabbinic Jewish world. Interestingly, various debates within the Babylonian Talmud deliberate the rationale behind the exclusion of converts hailing from Palmyra (Tarmod/Tadmor).⁵⁷ Of particular note is the unanimity among the Rabbis within the Talmudic literature consistently advocating for the rejection of converts from Palmyra. Moreover, the central Rabbi in this discussion, Rabbi Yohanan, is a contemporary of Odaenathus and Zenobia.

This underscores the substantial debate surrounding the acceptance of Jewish converts, and implies that many in Palmyra and its vicinity may have converted. It also provides credence to the assumption that the Rabbis did not refer to Zenobia’s conversion because they generally opposed conversions and proselytization. Furthermore, this discourse serves as compelling evidence attesting to the allure

57 Babylonian Talmud, *Niddah* 56b,11–12; Babylonian Talmud, *Yevamot* 16a:10; 16a,15; 16a,17; 16b,3.

of ancient Judaism, and that at least part of the Jewish community in Palmyra espoused a proselytizing sect who advocated for Jewish conversion. The prevalence of Jewish converts in Palmyra, coupled with the acceptance or endorsement of such conversions by the city's Jewish community, likely constitutes the incentive behind the recurring suspicion regarding the origins and Jewishness of Jews from Palmyra, thus categorising them as *mamzerim* (bastards). This may have also been the justification for Rabbi Yohanan's argument and debate with his colleagues.⁵⁸ Additionally, it is evident that this Palmyrene faction did not adhere to Rabbinic authority, and was part of the world of Conventional Judaism (Hellenistic Judaism). The possibility exists that the theological tenets of some of these adherents evolved to something akin to Judeo-Christian beliefs in the 4th century CE,⁵⁹ which can be also seen in the 5th century CE Christian text "The Life of Alexander Akoimètos,"⁶⁰ which will be debated later. Similarly, Benjamin of Tudela's account will shed light on this aspect of the community, and will also be discussed later.

Although the Jewish community in Palmyra adhered to practices and beliefs historically categorized as Judaism, their faith markedly contrasted with Rabbinic Judaism. Significant to this debate are the Talmudic references to Zenobia as they reinforce the assumption that Zenobia and her beliefs posed a tangible threat to the Rabbis and their world. The perceived imminent and cataclysmic danger posed by Queen Zenobia and the Jewish community in Palmyra likely fostered the general hatred perceived in the Talmud towards the city of Palmyra. This sentiment is reflected in passages expressing a desire for the city's destruction under the pretext that its inhabitants assisted in the destruction of both Jewish Temples in Jerusalem.⁶¹

"R. Yohanan said: He who sees the destruction of Tarmod is happy, for it participated in the destruction of the First Temple and in the destruction of the Second Temple. At the destruction of the First Temple it supplied 80,000 archers and at the destruction of the Second Temple it also supplied 80,000 archers."⁶²

⁵⁸ Appelbaum 2011, 536–537.

⁵⁹ This is with regards to the Jewish-Christian sect/belief that existed until the end of the first millennium CE. They even prayed in synagogues for centuries after the death of Jesus, side by side with Jews from other sects and streams. See: Kimelman 1981, 244; Wright 1992, 164–165; Wylén 1996, 190; Boyarin 2004; Berard 2006, 112–113; Schremer 2010.

⁶⁰ The Life of Alexander Akoimètos, 35.

⁶¹ Jerusalem Talmud, *Ta'anit* 4,5,23; Midrash Rabbah, *Bereshit Rabbah*, 56,11; *Eikah Rabbah*, 2,4.

⁶² Jerusalem Talmud, *Ta'anit* 4,5,23; the translation was taken from: Appelbaum 2011, 538.

The rejoicing at the downfall of Palmyra, along with the association of its inhabitants with the destruction of the Jewish Temples, is principally credited to Rabbi Yohanan, a contemporary of Queen Zenobia. In addition, the claim regarding the Temples' destruction at the hands of the Palmyrenes finds endorsement from several Rabbis, including contemporaries of Zenobia, such as Rabbi Huna and Rabbi Hanina. Such apprehension towards Palmyra, its Jewish community, and Zenobia, persisted to such an extent that hatred towards the city endured in Rabbinic debate for centuries thereafter.⁶³

It is noteworthy to highlight that the sole debate in the Talmud which mentions Zenobia by name, and has received relatively little attention within academic discourse, pertains to the incarceration of certain Rabbis.⁶⁴ Millar referred to this text in only one sentence, "the Talmud has one anecdote of an appeal by Jewish elders to Zenobia, but the attitude expressed there is otherwise hostile."⁶⁵ To clarify, the Talmudic legend explicitly opposes Zenobia throughout its entirety, contrasting with the general avoidance of her mention elsewhere in the Talmud. Instead, the Talmud focuses on expressing disdain towards converts from Palmyra and the city of Palmyra itself. Given that this legend is the only reference to Queen Zenobia within the Talmud, this anecdote serves as a singular lens into the hazardous nature of the Rabbis' relationship with Queen Zenobia. This in turn serves to prompt a consideration of the origins and underlying motivations that shaped this negative disposition, rather than attributing this antagonistic attitude to an arbitrary source. To better understand this complex text, the second part will be discussed first:

"Zeir bar Ḥinena was captured at Safsufa. Rabbi Ammi and Rabbi Samuel went to negotiate for him. Queen Zenobia said to them, your Creator usually does wonders for you; put Him under pressure! There came a Saracen carrying a sabre. He said to them, with this sabre did Odenathus kill his brother. Zeir bar Ḥinena was saved."⁶⁶

It is evident from this account that Zenobia arrested Zeir bar Ḥinena, who came from the Rabbinic world. Thus, two Rabbis went to appeal for his release. This is not a mere "[...] story of an appeal by Jewish elders to the Palmyrene queen."⁶⁷ as

⁶³ Babylonian Talmud, *Yevamot*, 17a,5.

⁶⁴ For example, Southern only dedicated two sentences to it in her book, and they clearly show she misunderstood the situation and context the story refers to: Southern 2008, 12.

⁶⁵ Millar 1971, 13; he cited and referred to "Jerusalem Talmud, *Terumoth* 8:12 (transl. Schwab. III, 107)." This citation is not the only way to cite it. In other editions, it is Jerusalem Talmud, *Terumot* 8,4,12–13.

⁶⁶ Jerusalem Talmud, *Terumot* 8,4,13 (transl. Heinrich W. Guggenheimer edition).

⁶⁷ Kaizer 2010, 118, n. 27.

Kaizer mentioned in a footnote, but rather the depiction of a considerable ideological gap.⁶⁸ The two paradoxical accounts of Zenobia's relationship with the Jews are strong evidence of this. On the one hand, non-Jewish texts accentuate Zenobia's good relationship with the Jewish people, while on the other hand, the only Jewish source, belonging to Rabbinic circles, claims otherwise. To reconcile this contradiction, it is safe to assume that Zenobia favoured Conventional Judaism, and not Rabbinic Judaism. This assumption is strengthened by the fact that Zeir bar Ḥinena was most probably not the only person from the Rabbinical sphere to be arrested by Zenobia:

"Rebbi Issi was captured in Safsufa. Rebbi Jonathan said, may the dead be wrapped in his shroud. Rebbi Simeon ben Laqish said, even if I should kill or be killed, I shall go and save him by force. He went and negotiated; they handed him over to him. He said to them, come to our old man, he shall pray for you. They came to Rebbi Joḥanan. He said to them, what was in your mind to do to him shall be done to these people. They did not reach Epipshrus (אפיפסרוס) when all of them were gone."⁶⁹

Another Rabbi, Rebbi Issi, was also captured in Safsufa. Although it does not clearly state that Zenobia's forces arrested him, the second paragraph, which was discussed first in this article, shows this was the same place where Zeir bar Ḥinena was arrested. While both were eventually released, the circumstances and conditions surrounding this remain obscure. Furthermore, the Talmud refrains from mentioning the reasons for their arrests in both tales,⁷⁰ thus implying the reason was their beliefs or views. The narrative of the release of Zeir bar Ḥinena is especially peculiar, given the apparent absence of details on his release, which could imply a deliberate act of censorship. This, coupled with this singular reference to Zenobia within the Talmudic corpus, underscores the noticeable schism between her and the Rabbis. Moreover, the conspicuous omission of any discourse regarding Zenobia's conversion to Judaism, or her Jewish faith, within Talmudic literature aligns with the Rabbis' stance against conversion and proselytization, thus representing not an anomaly but rather a predictable outcome.

Despite this unfavourable account from the Talmud, there is further evidence to suggest that Zenobia had amicable relations with most Jewish communities and sects. For instance, in certain non-Rabbinic Jewish texts, her husband Odaenathus

⁶⁸ Andrade defined this story as confusing and murky: Andrade 2018, 182; as I explain, it is essentially a manifestation of the rivalry between the Rabbis and Zenobia.

⁶⁹ Jerusalem Talmud, *Terumot* 8,4,12 (transl. Heinrich W. Guggenheimer edition with some small amendments of mine).

⁷⁰ Regarding the first text, the lack of explanation for the arrest was mentioned in: Andrade 2018, 182.

is depicted as a lion sent from the sun, who destroyed rebellions against Rome and defeated Persia, with an ultimate destiny to rule over Rome.⁷¹ This portrayal suggests unequivocal support for Odaenathus from many Jewish communities, even if he attempted to become the Roman Emperor. Consequently, such support likely extended to Queen Zenobia and their younger son following the death of Odaenathus and their elder son. This may be supported by a mosaic found in one of the Jewish prayer halls/synagogues found in Palmyra.⁷² Another such evidence is a bilingual Greek and Latin inscription from Egypt that confirms an old Ptolemaic grant of asylum to a synagogue:⁷³

βασιλίσσης καὶ βασι|λέως προσταξάντων | ἀντὶ τῆς προανακεῖ|μένης περὶ τῆς ἀναθέσε|ως
τῆς προσευχῆς πλα| |κὸς ἡ ὑπογεγραμμένη | ἐπιγραφῇτω· [*uacat*] | βασιλεὺς Πτολεμαῖος
Εὐ|εργέτης τὴν προσευχὴν ἄσυλον. | *Regina et* | | *rex iusser(un)t*.⁷⁴

“On the orders of the queen and king, in place of the previous plaque about the dedication of the proseuche let what is written below be written up. King Ptolemy Euergetes (proclaimed) the proseuche inviolate. The queen and king gave the order.”⁷⁵

This inscription has been prominently referenced in scholarly discourse pertaining to the connection between Zenobia, Judaism and Christianity. However, during such debates, it was raised that rights of asylum were uncommon in the 3rd century CE. Therefore, it was conjectured that the individuals responsible for reaffirming such privileges were more probably “Cleopatra VII and her brother Ptolemy XIV (47–44 BCE) or her son Ptolemy XV (Caesarion).”⁷⁶ Consequently, prudence is warranted when utilising this inscription in the debate.

Nevertheless, certain conclusions can be reached even if this inscription was not included in the debate. It is conceivable to posit that both Queen Zenobia and Palmyra’s Jewish community in the 3rd century CE epitomised a manifestation of Conventional Judaism. The Rabbinical establishment would likely be apprehensive of a hypothetical scenario involving the establishment of a Palmyrene Empire led by Queen Zenobia. They possibly foresaw her potential to encourage the flourishing of a Judaism characterised by cosmopolitanism and inclusivity. Furthermore, had she triumphed over the formidable Roman Empire, such an outcome could have been interpreted as divinely endorsed. This in turn would have further exac-

⁷¹ Or. sib. 2,164–171; Appelbaum 2011, 528.

⁷² This will be discussed later in the article.

⁷³ OGIS I 129 = ILS I 574 = Corp. Ims. jud. 1449; Millar 1971, 13.

⁷⁴ CIJ II no. 1449.

⁷⁵ CIJ II no. 1449 (transl. Horbury – Noy 1992, 213).

⁷⁶ Bingen 1982; Horbury – Noy 1992, 214.

erbated the concerns of the rabbinical leadership regarding the erosion of their traditional influence and authority, an outcome she may have already attempted to create according to the only relevant Talmudic legend. Therefore, the purported omission of Queen Zenobia and her conversion to Judaism from Talmudic narratives can be construed as consistent with the ideological stance of the Rabbinical tradition.

Why Judaism?

While the principal contention challenging Queen Zenobia's Jewish inclinations is readily disproved, it is necessary to question the motivations underlying the potential contemplation of conversion to Judaism by an individual of her eminence and stature. It is important to highlight that Queen Zenobia's purported conversion to Judaism does not stand as a singular instance of royal conversion to Judaism within the annals of history. For example, Queen Helena of Adiabene converted to Judaism in the 1st century CE.⁷⁷ Similarly, King Abikarib As'ad of Himyar (r. c 383–433 CE),⁷⁸ his dynasty, many subsequent rulers, and substantial segments of the aristocracy of the Himyarite Kingdom converted and remained ardent Jews until the demise of their kingdom at the hands of the Aksumites in 525–531 CE.⁷⁹ The final recorded conversion of a pagan royal family, accompanied by substantial segments of their aristocracy, occurred in the Khazar Kingdom in the 9th or 10th century CE.⁸⁰ Furthermore, there was an intriguing phenomenon where numerous aristocratic women from Rome adopted Jewish customs in the 1st and 2nd centuries CE.⁸¹ Consequently, Judaism merits recognition as a dominant, pervasive and appealing religion at least until the 6th century CE, and even later.

The partiality to Judaism amongst women appears to have been more pronounced than among men, a trend paralleled in the successful efforts of Christi-

⁷⁷ Marciak 2018.

⁷⁸ Lecker 1995; Hoyland 2001, 146.

⁷⁹ Pirenne 1974, 119; Christides 2013; le Roux 2021, 2.

⁸⁰ Up until a few years ago, there was consensus regarding this conversion. However, the last decade and a half has seen several academics casting doubt on this. See: Stampfer 2013.

⁸¹ This influence was also the reason for the forced recruitment of some of the Jewish community into the army in 19 CE by Emperor Tiberius: *Ios. ant. Iud.* 18,81–83; on this recruitment see also: Rocca 2010; regarding the appeal of Judaism to Gentiles and the missionary activities of certain streams, the earliest evidence of the Jewish community in Rome is pertinent. This evidence refers to the expulsion of Jews from Rome in 139 BCE for attempting to convert Gentiles: *Val. Max.* 1,3,3; *Serv. Aen.* 8,187.

anity,⁸² an offshoot of Judaism, to attract female adherents.⁸³ Moreover, Zenobia consolidated her leadership amidst conflicts with both the Persians and the Romans,⁸⁴ while lacking in Palmyrene forces who were too few to defend her territories against the dual threats. Conjecture suggests these forces may have been too limited even to deter Arab incursions. Thus, she reverted to diplomacy, fostering benevolence and goodwill in a bid to acquire and mobilise pro-Palmyrene sentiments within the cities she controlled and beyond.⁸⁵

Who were the men Zenobia sought to persuade to join her army and endeavoured to gain their support to realise her imperial ambitions? It is plausible that she recruited from among the local populace, a practice akin to that of Roman garrisons. Notably, in regions such as Palmyra and the broader Eastern Mediterranean, there were numerous adherents of monotheistic religions. The expansion of monotheistic ideologies encompassed not only the dissemination of Judaism,⁸⁶ and Christianity,⁸⁷ but also their influence on other beliefs, notably evident in the prevalence of the so-called ‘anonymous god’ which enjoyed significant popularity in Palmyra.⁸⁸ The belief in the ‘anonymous god’ did not necessarily refer to one god,⁸⁹ although it utilised numerous terminologies and blessings attributed to Judaism and Christianity, such as: “Lord of the Universe”, and “Merciful” in Palmyra; “Our Lord, Our Lady and the Son of Our Lords” in Hatra and finally “Lord of the Gods” in Edessa.⁹⁰

⁸² Regarding the spread of Christianity see: Stark 1996; Sloomjtes 2011, 100–105.

⁸³ Regarding early Christianity appeal to women and their role in the early Christian world see: Clark 1990; Kraemer 1994, 128–197; Stark 1996, 109–142; Salzman 2002, 138–176;

⁸⁴ Bobou – Raja – Romanowska 2021, 162;

⁸⁵ Nakamura 1993, 134.

⁸⁶ From the story of the Jewish gold in the Roman treasury, and its disappearance, it is possible to learn about the importance of the Jewish community in the city of Rome, and the size of the Jewish communities in Laodicea, Apamea, Adramyttium, and Pergamum. The gold was intended for the Temple in Jerusalem, and it seems that most of it was composed of the half (or third) shekel tax that every Jewish man or household had to pay annually to the Temple. The sums mentioned in this event by Cicero can be proof of the large Jewish communities in the cities, and their vicinities, that were mentioned. Furthermore, the pressure the Jewish community of the city of Rome wielded in this incident is an indication that even in such an early period, the Jewish community in the city was vast and significant: Cic. Flacc. 28,66–69; Josephus quoted Strabo, who had said that Jews were present in all the cities and it was difficult to find a spot in the inhabited world that the Jews had not reached or settled in: Ios. ant. Iud. 14,114.

⁸⁷ Regarding the spread of Christianity see: Sloomjtes 2011, 100–105; regarding Christianity in Zenobia’s territories, see also: Andrade 2018, 185–186.

⁸⁸ Kaizer 2010, 118; Smirnou 2021.

⁸⁹ Kubiak-Schneider 2021, 218–227.

⁹⁰ Kubiak-Schneider 2016, 337–340.

The praising in Palmyra – “He whose name is blessed forever” (bryk šmh l’lm), “Lord of the Universe” (mr l’m), “Merciful” (rḥmn) – is in a more monotheistic vein, possibly suggesting a greater Jewish influence.⁹¹ On the other hand, the inscriptions in Hatra refer “to the city triad called in the local dialect of Aramaic: ‘Our Lord’ – Maren (mrn), ‘Our Lady’ – Marten (mrtn), ‘Son of Our Lords’ – Bar-Marin (brmryn),”⁹² implying a greater Christian influence in the region, although this is a gross simplification of the process and terminology. Nevertheless, certain terms were employed in conjunction with names of different deities across different centuries, prompting suggestions that some of these terms were known and adopted from other cultures.⁹³ However, many of these cultures disappeared centuries before Rome annexed the Eastern Mediterranean. Thus, the greater use of the anonymised form, as well as the choice of terms like “merciful,” can indicate a Jewish or Christian influence in the 2nd and 3rd centuries CE that was gradually absorbed into the neighbouring cultures as they evolved during this period. This process may have been shaped by individuals who practised syncretism, moving between faiths without full conversion or commitment.

Therefore, according to this line of argument, the terminology implies that there was greater Jewish influence in Palmyra, while in Hatra there was more Christian influence. Unfortunately, this hypothesis remains speculative due to limited evidence. However, a thorough examination of references to the “anonymous god(s)” and a refined typology could enhance understanding of changes over time. This analysis may reveal shifts in the deity’s anonymity and alterations in associated terminology, shedding light on potential influences.

The hypothesis linking the ‘anonymous god’ cult in Palmyra to Judaism gains support from its earliest attestations in the first decades of the 2nd century CE.⁹⁴ The Diaspora Revolt and the Second Jewish Revolt occurred in the early 2nd century CE, leading to significant Jewish refugee influx from Cyrenaica, Cyprus, Judaea, and Egypt, potentially resulting in many settling in Syria, possibly with a special concentration in Palmyra. This displacement facilitated the dissemination of Jewish

91 As Kubiak-Schneider rightly notes, there is one inscription in Palmyrene referring to Baalshamin as Master of the Universe/Eternity’ from 114 BCE. Yet, this may have come from foreign influence (including Jewish) that did not last, and there are 250 years until such titles appear again in the city. They appear in the second century CE en masse, and on one occasion it is in an inscription from 162 CE that refers to Zeus: Kubiak-Schneider 2024, 101–103; however, the widespread use of this title from the second century CE, alongside the anonymity of the God are novel and may be indicative of Jewish influence, especially in the use of the title “Lord of the Universe” or “Merciful” as a standalone reference to an anonymous one God.

92 Kubiak-Schneider 2016, 340.

93 Kubiak-Schneider 2016, 343–346.

94 For the date, see: Teixidor 1979, 115.

ideas and culture across the Empire, likely contributing to heightened interest in the religion. Moreover, out of the said connections regarding the worship of the ‘anonymous god’, associating the shift of the terminology in Palmyra to Judaism receives substantial support when compared with the birth of the worship of a “one God” called the “Merciful” (rḥmn) in South Arabia, especially Himyar, from the early 4th century CE, due to Jewish presence and influence. The said influence and growing belief in the “One God” drove the King of Himyar, Abikarib As‘ad (c 383–433 CE), to convert to Judaism.⁹⁵ The shift in South Arabia is not normally discussed in relation to Palmyra. Nevertheless, such a case in an entirely different location is an excellent example of Jewish influence on the local groups in the area, especially Arab groups, who absorbed changes similar to those seen in Palmyra, eventually leading their local rulers to convert to Judaism. However, the similarity in terms is great, and the time and cultural correlations between the two ethnic groups are immense. This implies that these two separate phenomena may be connected and not so isolated. There is always the possibility that the change in South Arabia from the beginning of the 4th century CE was also driven by Jews, and/or believers of the anonymous god who were influenced by Jews, who may have immigrated to Arabia from Palmyra after the fall of Zenobia in 272 CE.

Further Evidence for the Jews of Palmyra

According to the archaeological record, Palmyra’s Jewish community endured at least from the Principate until Late Antiquity. Remarkably, the extent of evidence for this community from the Roman period surpasses that of any other Jewish Diaspora community, except for the community of the city of Rome. This exceptional abundance of evidence, particularly notable compared to other Syrian cities, is exemplified by the presence of remains from three distinct buildings in Palmyra which potentially held Jewish religious affairs, and may have also functioned simultaneously. The most renowned of these structures, recently designated as the *Mezuzah* Building by Cussini,⁹⁶ comprises only the surviving doorway that indicates its former grandeur. The presence of Deuteronomy quotes on the doorway,⁹⁷ led to its classification as the *Mezuzah* Building, akin to the textual content typically found in a *mezuzah*, that Jews traditionally affix to the doorpost of their homes. However, scholarly debate persists regarding its precise function, with some

⁹⁵ Grasso 2023, 70–91.

⁹⁶ Cussini 2024.

⁹⁷ CIJ II 821–823 = IJO III Syr44–Syr47; Noy – Bloedhorn 2004, 70–75.

proposing it served as the doorway to a synagogue.⁹⁸ Conversely, some scholars, noting the absence of donor inscriptions typical in many synagogues, proposed that the structure served as the entrance to a mansion belonging to a wealthy Jewish family.⁹⁹ Regardless of its function, the building serves as compelling evidence of Jewish presence in Palmyra, underscoring the community's wealth and significance in the city.

Another important Jewish structure in the city is the synagogue discovered beneath the later Christian Basilica I (fig. 1). Unlike the *Mezuzah* Building, which is tentatively dated to the 3rd or 4th century due to the sole surviving doorway, the synagogue is securely dated to the 3rd century CE, during the reigns of Odaenathus and Zenobia. Alternatively, the primary challenge with this evidence lies in the incomplete or absent publication of the synagogue, a recurring issue with many Jewish discoveries in the city. From the scanty publications, it is possible to glean certain details about the synagogue, including its identification as such,¹⁰⁰ and its size (22m by 13m).¹⁰¹ Furthermore, unlike the uncertain dating of the *mezuzah* doorway, the strata containing the synagogue dates to the 2nd to 3rd century CE, corresponding with the reign of Odaenathus and Zenobia. However, it is possible that both structures existed and functioned during this period.

The third structure with potential Jewish religious significance in Palmyra is situated directly next to the synagogue's wall. Dubbed the Rue des Églises house (N1–N2), this building has sparked debate due to the discovery of a mosaic in one of its rooms (fig. 2). The focal point of contention is a *triclinium* within the structure, boasting an impressive mosaic floor dated to the mid-3rd century CE, concurrent with the synagogue's era. The mosaic has two central panels (fig. 3). One depicts an armed man riding a winged horse while piercing a chimaera with a spear, which was suggested as a parallel to the myth of Bellerophon slaying the chimera (fig. 4). The second is of a tiger hunt, with a rider firing an arrow from his bow toward a tiger that was already pierced by another arrow, with a second tiger portrayed in the panel directly under the mounted archer. Occasionally, the panels are interpreted as Odaenathus' triumph. Additionally, the mounted archer hunt scene has an inscription in cursive Palmyrene script, written between the bow and its string saying: "Diodotos has made this mosaic, himself and his sons." (fig. 5) It was suggested that instead of Diodotos, the inscription may have originally contained Odaenathus' or one of his son's name, which was subsequently

⁹⁸ Landauer 1884, 933; Berger 1891b, 65–72; 1891a, 260; Kaizer 2010, 117.

⁹⁹ Mittwoch 1902, 206; Kraeling et al. 1956, 391; Naveh 1989, 62; Naveh – Shaked 1993, 35.

¹⁰⁰ Jastrzębowska 2011–2012; 2013, 177, n.2; the person who attempted to solve this ambiguousness is Cussini: Cussini 2024, 109–110.

¹⁰¹ Gawlikowski 2021, 187.



Fig. 1: The entrance to the building that housed Basilica I, which was previously used as a synagogue (the photo is courtesy of Aleksandra Kubiak-Schneider).

altered to a different name. However, the proposal that the inscription was altered to the name of the mosaicist is tenuous,¹⁰² as it seems unlikely for an artist to sign adjacent to the central figure. This implies the original inscription represents the given name of the original donor, while the name in the amended inscription, if it indeed was changed from the original, represents the name of the donor that paid for the alteration of the room and mosaic. However, if the mosaic was indeed meant to originally represent Odaenathus and one of his sons, and the inscription was to that effect, then the changes in the inscription more probably date to after Zenobia's defeat. In such a case, the new name does not necessarily represent anyone who donated a refurbishment, but rather an attempt to erase the connection to Zenobia. Roman rule saw such connections as unfavourable, and the name Diodotos is merely the name of a prominent member of the community. Nevertheless, it is possible that the original inscription before the alterations referred to the donor and his sons. Thus, the question remains: does the mosaic depict the donor and one

102 Gawlikowski 2003, 315, 318; Gawlikowski 2021, 70; Cussini 2024, 110–111.



Fig. 2: The room with the mosaic in the Rue des Églises house (N1–N2). The picture was taken to the direction of Jerusalem, i.e. south-south-west (the photo is courtesy of Michał Gawlikowski).

of his sons, or Odaenathus and one of his sons, or whether they are one and the same, and Odaenathus himself donated the mosaic?

In addition, the mosaic features Jewish religious motifs, including a menorah and two pairs of open hands, located on panels adjacent to the main mosaic and



Fig. 3: The main part of the Rue des Églises house (N1–N2) mosaic, which was sometimes referred to as “Odaenathus’s victories”, with the two panels, one of the Bellerophon scene and the other of the hunting scene in the middle (the photo is courtesy of Michał Gawlikowski).

facing towards Jerusalem.¹⁰³ Gawlikowski proposed that these areas with Jewish symbols were added shortly after the original mosaic was laid,¹⁰⁴ indicating a shift in the room’s function to serve as a prayer hall.¹⁰⁵ However, given that the two mosaics were installed nearly simultaneously, it is inappropriate to categorise them as distinct phases of the same room. Additionally, it is not possible to definitively assert that the room was not under the ownership of the Jewish community during the initial mosaic installation. This suggests two potential scenarios. Either the room initially served as a dining hall or meeting space for the Jewish community and was later repurposed as a prayer hall/synagogue, or it functioned as a prayer hall/synagogue from its inception, even before the addition of the second mosaic. Accordingly, if Gawlikowski’s interpretation is accurate and the mosaic indeed portrays Odaenathus and one of his sons, it would highlight the remarkable and unparal-

¹⁰³ Gawlikowski 2003, 318; Cussini 2024, 111.

¹⁰⁴ Gawlikowski 2003, 318.

¹⁰⁵ Although in the first publication, he does not define a specific religion: Gawlikowski 2003, 318; Gawlikowski 2021, 70, 187.



Fig. 4: A closeup of the panel of Bellerophon slaying the chimaera (the photo is courtesy of Michał Gawlikowski).

leled link between Odaenathus, Zenobia, and their lineage to the Jewish community of Palmyra, especially as the mosaic was possibly donated by Odaenathus himself. However, in the case that the mosaic depicts a different donor and his sons, the fact that the donor wanted both to be depicted as armed riders raises the possibility that the donor and his son were military men. They may have been high-ranking officers or generals in Odaenathus' army, as only soldiers of such rank would be wealthy and prominent enough to donate such a magnificent mosaic, and maybe even the



Fig. 5: Closeup of the panel depicting the tiger hunt with the inscription “Diodotos has made this mosaic, himself and his sons” (the picture is courtesy of Michał Gawlikowski).

entire room. Accordingly, both options show the relationship between Odaenathus’ army and the Jewish community. This association can explain the Christian assertion of Zenobia’s extensive connections to the Jewish community and the possibility of her conversion to Judaism, thereby lending credence to the historical plausibility of such an occurrence. Moreover, it aligns with the importance that the Jewish community had in the city, as all these three buildings possibly acted as synagogues concurrently in the 3rd century CE during Queen Zenobia’s reign. In this context, it is pertinent to note the discovery of five lamps adorned with a menorah motif within the cellar of the Allat temple.¹⁰⁶ Additionally, a hoard of bronze coins, potentially dating to the late 4th century, was unearthed in the same room, but it is not clear if

¹⁰⁶ Krogulska 2019, 407–409.

they were deposited together, and if the date of the lamps is contemporaneous with the date of the coins or earlier than the coins.¹⁰⁷

As previously noted, the Jewish community of Palmyra embraced conversions, potentially even encouraging them. Apart from the Rabbinic discussions highlighted earlier, concerning converts from Palmyra, numerous other debates and cases address this issue. One particularly perplexing and intricate case revolves around the husband of Rachel, daughter of Samuel/Shmuel. Samuel of Nehardea, also known as Samuel bar Abba, was a renowned Babylonian Rabbi of the first generation of *Amoraim* who served as the leader of the Jewish community of Nehardea (ancient city of Anbar, located near modern-day Fallujah, Iraq). He had two daughters, both of whom were captured during the city's conquest by Odaenathus or one of his generals.¹⁰⁸ One of his daughters, Rachel, was assaulted and bore a son, later known as Rav Mari.¹⁰⁹ According to legend, his father, Issur the convert, likely the Palmyrene soldier who abducted his mother,¹¹⁰ Rachel, was not Jewish at the time of conception but was Jewish at his birth, i.e. converted to Judaism during her pregnancy.¹¹¹ This account is noteworthy as it not only highlights the widespread conversion of Palmyrenes, but also emphasises that this occurred within the ranks of their military forces, the same forces that empowered Odaenathus, and later Zenobia, and her subsequent attempt to seize the Roman East, or more.

The evidence for Jewish presence in Palmyra extends beyond religious edifices and texts to include numerous inscriptions left by Palmyrene Jews. Epigraphic records of Jewish presence in Palmyra are categorised into two groups: those originating from the city and those from Judaea/Palaestina. However, distinguishing between Jewish adherents and followers of the One God in Palmyra poses a significant challenge, particularly given the prevalent influence of Judaism on the belief in the One God within the city, as demonstrated earlier.

Eleonora Cussini, the editor of the Palmyrene Aramaic Texts, identified several inscriptions from Palmyra with distinctively Jewish characteristics in a recent publication.¹¹² Among them, three inscriptions originate from small incense altars,

¹⁰⁷ Cussini 2024, 111.

¹⁰⁸ Jerusalem Talmud, *Ketubot*, 2,6,3; although it is not explicitly stated that the city was conquered by Odaenathus, the dating of the life of Samuel, and the location of the city, brought Talmudic scholars to identify the conquest of the city with the Palmyrene invasion of the region in 263 CE: Neusner 1966, 43.

¹⁰⁹ Babylonian Talmud, *Berakhot*, 16a,10.

¹¹⁰ Guggenheimer was one of the first to raise this, although it was hard to trace back his sources: Guggenheimer 2012, 107, n.109.

¹¹¹ Babylonian Talmud, *Bava Batra*, 149a,3.

¹¹² Cussini 2024, 120–121.

while three others are associated with funerary contexts. Notably, the inscriptions from the altars, inscribed in Palmyrene Aramaic, include PAT 0446, PAT 1911 (dated to 251 CE), and PAT 0393 (dated to 256 CE). Additionally, one of the texts from a funerary setting is a tomb sale document, inscribed in Greek and catalogued as Inv. VIII, 68. Another is a Greek and Palmyrene bilingual foundation inscription dated to 212 CE, that is known in scholarly research by various names, including PAT 0057.¹¹³ The final funerary inscription, PAT 2729, dating to 243 CE documents the purchase of a portion of a tomb by three Jewish brothers. This inscription exemplifies a significant challenge in the study of Ancient Judaism. Typically, Jewish or Yahwistic theophoric names are often the sole means of identifying individuals as Jewish. However, many Jews bore more general Semitic, Hellenistic, or Romanised names. In this inscription, the challenge persists. While one brother, Išḥaq, and the father, Ya'kob, possess unmistakably Jewish names, the other brothers, Aurelius Shum'on and Mezabbana, do not. Similarly, in the five previously mentioned inscriptions, Jewish identification was primarily established through names or genealogical lineage. Nonetheless, these are not the sole inscriptions that relate to the Jewish community of Palmyra in such a manner. For example, the name Ya'kob (y'qwb) in PAT 2615 can also be identified as Jewish, as well as Bani Shim'on in PAT 2085 and 2134. This survey and analysis of names are partial, and so we must hope for a more comprehensive examination in Cussini's forthcoming article.¹¹⁴ Furthermore, it is interesting that all the securely dated inscriptions linked to Judaism, discussed herein, originate from the 3rd century CE, predominantly from the mid-century, coinciding with King Odaenathus' reign.

Additionally, three Palmyrene Aramaic dedications on altars, PAT 0446, PAT 1911, and PAT 0393, demonstrate familiarity with the book of Psalms, providing further evidence for Jewish presence in the city and its influence, which likely inspired the distinct form of worship to the anonymous god. Of these dedications, the two securely dated ones, PAT 1911 from 251 CE and PAT 0393 from 256 CE, originate from the mid-third century, coinciding with Odaenathus' reign.¹¹⁵ This is similar to much of the evidence already presented, thus highlighting the prevalence and significance of Judaism in the region, particularly in Palmyra at the time. This elucidates why individuals seeking power would consider aligning themselves with the Jewish community.

With regards to evidence outside of Palmyra, the prevalence of Palmyrene Jews in the funerary record of Judaea/Palaestina serves as evidence of the widespread significance and influence of the Palmyrene Jewish community, underscoring its

¹¹³ CIJ II 820 = PAT 0557 = IJO III Syr49; Kaizer 2010, 117.

¹¹⁴ Cussini Forthcoming.

¹¹⁵ On the topic see: Cussini 2024, 122; Cussini Forthcoming.

wealth and prominence in the region. For instance, the inscription CIIP II 1119, found on an ossuary in Jerusalem, commemorates a woman named Ima, identified as the mother of “Ḥanana ... the ḥazan of the synagogue of Palmyra.” Moreover, there are inscriptions in Palmyrene Aramaic discovered in the vicinity of Jerusalem. For example, CIIP I 79, alongside several others, like CIIP I 421, CIIP I 430, and CIIP I 439, were uncovered in a burial cave near Naḥal Atarot, situated north of the Shuʿafat neighbourhood. Notably, this burial cave neighboured the resting place of Helena of Adiabene, a foreign queen who converted to Judaism. Additionally, CIIP II 1120 from the region features Palmyrene script.

Furthermore, some inscriptions from Jerusalem, such as CIIP I 492, CIIP I 508, and possibly CIIP I 105, contain names thought to be Palmyrene in origin. Typically, these inscriptions from Jerusalem are dated to the 1st century BCE or 1st century CE. However, Jerusalem is not the sole significant burial site yielding Palmyrene inscriptions in Judaea/Palestina. Beit Sheʿarim in the Galilee, a famous Jewish city known for its extensive necropolis, also boasts a wealth of inscriptions from the 2nd to the 4th centuries CE which indicate the burial of Palmyrene Jews in the area.¹¹⁶ For example, Halls C, E, K and G in Catacomb 1 include the inscriptions CIIP V.2 6944 (in Palmyrene, possibly referring to the same person in the Greek inscription CIIP V.2 6942–6943 in the same catacomb), CIIP V.2 6948 (Palmyrene script), CIIP V.2 6949 (Palmyrene script), CIIP V.2 6960 (Greek inscription with Palmyrene name), CIIP V.2 7005, CIIP V.2 7011 (Palmyrene script) and CIIP V.2 7018 (script influenced by Palmyrene script). Catacomb 3 contains four additional inscriptions written in Palmyrene script (CIIP V.2 7038, CIIP V.2 7041–7043), while Catacomb 4 contains Palmyrene names (for example CIIP V.2 7046 and 7053). One notable inscription, CIIP V.2 7053, is particularly significant due to a graffito suggesting that the deceased, Germanus, may have been a soldier, a topic to be explored extensively later. Equally noteworthy, alongside the numerous inscriptions, is the legend in the Mishnah and the Talmud referring to Miriam of Tarmod (of Palmyra).¹¹⁷

Further strong evidence for the significant presence of Judaism in the city, as well as the uniqueness of the community and their proselytism, can be found in a different source from Late Antiquity “The Life of Alexander Akoimētos” (the sleepless), a 5th century Christian text:

Ὁ δὲ μακάριος παρελθὼν πᾶσαν τὴν ἔρημον μετὰ τῶν ἀδελφῶν ἀδιαλείπτως ψαλλόντων ἦλθον εἰς τὴν πόλιν Σολομώντος τὴν ὀνομαζομένην εἰς τὴν βίβλον τῶν βασιλειῶν, ἣν ἔκτισεν εἰς τὴν ἔρημον, τὴν λεγομένην Πάλμυραν. οἱ δὲ πολῖται, τὸ πλῆθος τῶν ἀδελφῶν

¹¹⁶ For example: CIJ II 1010 = IJO III Syr51; Kaizer 2010, 117; another inscription will be analysed in length later.

¹¹⁷ Mishnah, *Nazir* 6,11; Babylonian Talmud, *Nazir* 47a,1,4; Kaizer 2010, 117.

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 πεποιθέναί ἐπὶ κύριον ἢ πεποιθέναί ἐπ' ἄνθρωπον. θαρσεῖτε, ἀδελφοί, ὅτι ὅθεν οὐ προσδοκῶμεν ἐπισκέπτεται ἡμᾶς ὁ κύριος. οἱ δὲ βάρβαροι οἱ ὄντες ἐν τοῖς τόποις ἐκείνοις παρῆχον αὐτοῖς οὐ τὴν τυχοῦσαν φιланθρωπίαν. τριῶν δὲ ἡμερῶν εἰς τὴν ἔρημον διαγόντων αὐτῶν, ἐξαπέστειλεν ὁ θεὸς κατὰ τὸν λόγον τοῦ ἁγίου καμηλαρίου ἀπὸ τεσσάρων μονῶν ὄντας τῆς πόλεως φέροντας πάντας τὰ ἀγαθά. καὶ δεξάμενοι καὶ εὐχαριστήσαντες τῷ θεῷ, μετέλαβον καὶ αὐτοί· καὶ οὕτως περιέσσευσεν ὥστε καὶ δεξάμενοι ἠϋρέθησαν αὐτοὶ παρέχοντες τοῖς πτωχοῖς τῆς πόλεως ἐκ τῶν ἀποσταλέντων αὐτοῖς.¹¹⁸

"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."¹¹⁹

In this 5th century text, the residents of Palmyra are called 'Jews who call themselves Christians.' Intagliata, like other scholars, believes that: "the term 'Jews' probably intended as an insult rather than a reflection of the religious condition of the inhabitants."¹²⁰ This assertion is plausible, considering the hostility Alexander Akoimētos and his adherents likely harboured toward the people of Palmyra, due to their refusal to open the gates and their lack of benevolence toward them.¹²¹

Alternatively, another possibility is that the choice of this derogative term carries a deeper and unique meaning laden with historical connotations. Kaizer suggested it may reflect a continuation of the population of the city from Queen Zenobia's reign to the early 5th century.¹²² However, a few other suggestions must be raised. One hypothesis posits that the adoption of this derogatory term stems

¹¹⁸ The Life of Alexander Akoimētos, 35; de Stoop 1911, 685–686.

¹¹⁹ The Life of Alexander Akoimētos, 35; transl. Caner 2002, 270–271; appears also in: Kaizer 2010, 115.

¹²⁰ Intagliata 2018, 47.

¹²¹ On the matter see also: Gatier 1995, 454–455; see also: Kaizer 2010, 115–116, 119.

¹²² Kaizer 2010, 119.

from narratives surrounding Zenobia's purported Jewish heritage, thus indicating a prevailing sentiment toward the city's populace that potentially included a substantial Jewish community, alongside a distinctive form of Christianity dominant in the region. This in turn may have been the reason why Paul of Samosata had a good relationship with Zenobia and a place in her court. Furthermore, it is possible there was a Jewish-Christian community, i.e. Jews who saw Jesus as either a prophet or the messiah, who were distinct or part of the Jewish community of Palmyra. Another possibility is that the term was not chosen derogatorily due to past stigma or reality, but rather because it aptly characterised the predominant religious factions in the city: a significant Jewish community, a Jewish-Christian community, and potentially a sizable Christian community with beliefs diverging from mainstream Christianity, that Alexander Akoimètos perceived as being more aligned with Judaism than Christianity. Accordingly, this text can be regarded as a corroboratory testimony for the strong Jewish presence and influence in Palmyra in late antiquity, especially in the 3rd and 4th centuries.

However, the debate regarding the Jewish community in Palmyra, its size, its influence and its importance in the Palmyrene military ranks in the 3rd century will not be complete without mentioning Benjamin of Tudela's much later account. In the 12th century, he described the Jewish community of Palmyra, which he claimed to have visited, as follows:

“And in Tarmod there are about 2,000 Jews. They are valiant in war and fight with the Christians and with the Arabs, which latter are under the dominion of Nur-ed-din the king, and they help their neighbours the Ishmaelites. At their head are R. Isaac Hajvani, R. Nathan, and R. Uziel.”¹²³

This Jewish population was suggested to have been the descendants of the Jewish community who resided in the city during Late Antique and Early Islamic times.¹²⁴ The text above implies that the city's Jewish community exhibited distinct characteristics compared to the many other rabbinic communities of the 12th century. This is theoretically indicative of their potential uniqueness also in earlier centuries. However, the discussion regarding this text cannot simply be concluded as such. As Gawlikowski, the excavator of Palmyra, stated in his book, there is no evidence of the existence of a city; it was just a fortress at the time.¹²⁵ Hence, the account cannot represent the Jews of Palmyra in the 12th century, and so it necessitates looking differently at the text in the context of the current debate. When doing so, there

¹²³ Benjamin of Tudela, *Itinerary* 49 (transl. Adler 1907, 31).

¹²⁴ Intagliata 2018, 65.

¹²⁵ Gawlikowski 2021, 202–204.

are three possibilities. Firstly, Benjamin of Tudela's tale is not about Palmyra but about Syrian Jews of his period, thus indicating that the Jews of Syria remained different when compared to other Jewish communities. This includes how some of them served their Muslim lords and masters even militarily. This in turn possibly reflects earlier periods. The second option is that Benjamin of Tudela's story is an adaptation of a tradition or an account from antiquity describing the Jewish community in the city, who were significant in number and served the city's masters militarily. The original account most probably referred to Zenobia's reign, as this time period fits well with the content of this passage. In such a case, the Christians and the Arabs, that the Jews of Palmyra are mentioned to be fighting, were the Romans and the Persians in the original account. Similarly, "their neighbours the Ishmaelites" they are fighting alongside/for were originally their Palmyrene neighbours and their liege Zenobia. It is even possible the term "Ishmaelites" was kept from the original ancient source, as the residents of Palmyra were in modern terms Arabs,¹²⁶ and so in certain Jewish traditions "Ishmaelites." I believe this option should be preferred, although a third one, a combination of the previous two, is also very probable.

Evidently, there is ample evidence for the uniqueness, size and importance (including in military terms) of the Jewish community of Palmyra in Zenobia's time. Furthermore, Jewish communities existed in neighbouring regions like Dura-Europos, where an exceptional synagogue was excavated. Additionally, the abundance of Judean coins discovered in excavations of the city corroborates the existence of a robust Jewish presence in Dura-Europos, suggesting many Jews settled there following the First Jewish Revolt of 66–74 CE.¹²⁷

Jewish Presence in the Roman Army in the Third Century

To understand the manpower Queen Zenobia needed to enlist outside of her city, it is essential to examine the cultural composition of the Roman army. Firstly, Roman garrisons frequently recruited from the local population, making their ethnic composition reflective of the region.¹²⁸ Secondly, and most importantly, Queen Zenobia did her utmost to persuade Roman military units to her side and was frequently successful. As a result, her army included Roman troops. Given this article's focus

¹²⁶ See: Grasso 2023.

¹²⁷ See: Adler 2022.

¹²⁸ Regarding the recruitment of locals, see for example: Shahîd 1984, 52–63; 1989, 459–474.

on monotheism and Zenobia's attitude and possible conversion to Judaism, it is vital to assess Jewish presence within the Roman army. The presence of Jews in the Roman army is often considered scarce,¹²⁹ with claims that these soldiers were impious or not considered "good Jews."¹³⁰ However, recent research disproves these assumptions.¹³¹

This is emphasised in Dio Cassius' *Historia Romana*, a composition he worked on in the first three decades of the 3rd century CE, where he presents a version of a speech delivered by Marcus Aurelius to his men before marching east to confront the rebelling Avidius Cassius in 175 CE.¹³² The Emperor said the next about Cassius' Eastern Roman army:

ἄλλως τε, εἰ καὶ ἐκεῖνος ἐκ τῶν πρὸς Πάρθους πραχθέντων εὐδόκιμός ἐστιν, ἔχετε καὶ ὑμεῖς Οὐῆρον, ὃς οὐδὲν ἦττον ἀλλὰ καὶ μᾶλλον αὐτοῦ καὶ ἐνίκησε πλεῖστα καὶ κατεκτήσατο. ἀλλὰ τάχα μὲν καὶ ἡδη μετανενόηκε, ζῶντά με μεμαθηκώς· οὐ γάρ που καὶ ἄλλως ἢ ὡς τετελευτηκότος μου τοῦτ' ἐποίησεν. ἂν δὲ καὶ ἐπὶ πλεῖον ἀντίσχη, ἀλλ' ὅταν γε καὶ προσιόντας ἡμᾶς πύθηται, πάντως γνωσιμαχίσει, καὶ ὑμᾶς φοβηθεῖς καὶ ἐμὲ αἰδεσθεῖς.¹³³

"You, at least, fellow-soldiers, ought to be of good cheer. For surely Cilicians, Syrians, Jews, and Egyptians have never proved superior to you and never will, even if they should muster as many tens of thousands more than you as they now muster fewer."¹³⁴

Marcus Aurelius sought to invigorate his men by mentioning that Avidius Cassius' Eastern Roman army, the army they were about to confront, was weaker than the Western Roman legions under his command. If Dio's account of the speech is accurate, there must have been a substantial Jewish presence in the Eastern Roman army. It is improbable for a military leader to risk lying to his troops in a manner easily disproven before a battle.¹³⁵ Moreover, lying to his soldiers would have been

¹²⁹ For example: Smallwood 1976, 127; Oppenheimer 2005b, 425; Eck 2021, 248.

¹³⁰ Oppenheimer 2005b, 424; Eck 2021, 248.

¹³¹ Olshanetsky 2021b; González-Salineró 2022; Olshanetsky 2023a.

¹³² This source was once brought as evidence for Jewish military service, but it considered the mention of Jews as fact. Moreover, Rocca suggested that maybe some of the Jews mentioned had been part of Jewish auxilia units, of which there is no evidence whatsoever. This mention was in an appendix to an article: Rocca 2010, 26.

¹³³ Cass. Dio. 72,25,3–6.

¹³⁴ Cass. Dio. 72,25,3–6 (transl. Earnest Cary, LCL).

¹³⁵ It is implausible that at least a good portion of any Roman army would not know the demographic composition of at least some or large parts of the Roman army. As troops in all units moved through the Empire to various regions, they met different units from all over the Empire. Also, if indeed the four groups mentioned above were one of, or the main source of, manpower for the Eastern Roman army, this would mean they were a main source of manpower for at

detrimental as Marcus Aurelius would have lost their trust and deceit would have undermined his objective in addressing his men.

Nevertheless, as it is reasonable to assume the account of this speech is not the original one, it is feasible that Dio, like other ancient authors, documented the speech as it was intended to be delivered.¹³⁶ This raises a few implications. First, Jewish military service must have been common during Dio's lifetime, as he would not have highlighted their presence in his speech if they were not a significant component of the Eastern Roman army. Secondly, the presence of a sizable portion of Jewish soldiers in the army must have been widely recognised. As Marcus Aurelius had no incentive to deceive in his speech, Dio's choice of words indicates there were a considerable number of Jewish soldiers in the Roman army, as he wrote the speech as it was intended to be delivered.

Further extensive evidence for Jewish military service can be found after general citizenship was granted to all free men of the Roman Empire by Emperor Caracalla in the year 212 CE in his *Constitutio Antoniniana*. This sudden abundance of evidence may stem from the growing number of Jews serving in the army. For example, the *Historia Augusta* records that soldiers erected a monument for Emperor Gordian the Third in the year 244 CE,¹³⁷ near the camp at *Circesium*, located on the border between the Roman and Persian Empires.¹³⁸

*Gordiano sepulchrum milites apud Circesium castrum fecerunt in finibus Persidis, titulum huius modi addentes et Graecis et Latinis et Persicis et Iudaicis et Aegyptiacis litteris, ut ab omnibus legeretur.*¹³⁹

"The soldiers built Gordian a tomb near the camp at Circesium, which is in the territory of Persia, and added an inscription to the following effect in Greek, Latin, Persian, Jewish, and Egyptian letters, so that all might read."¹⁴⁰

The inscription's use of a writing system associated with the Jews on the monument indicates significant recognition and honour for the minority group, which in turn

least a third of the Roman army. Thus, their presence must have been felt through the whole army.

136 This was common practice, as the ancient writers and historians tried to mimic Thucydides: Thuc. 1,22.

137 There were only two scholars who emphasized the fact that Jews were mentioned, and out of them only Rocca referred to it in connection with Jewish military service: Stern 1980, 634; Rocca 2010, 28.

138 *Circassium* is most probably the city known as the city of Buseira in today's Syria, at the confluence of the Khabur and the Euphrates.

139 SHA, Gord. 34.

140 SHA, Gord. 34 (transl. David Magie, LCL).

unequivocally highlights the substantial presence of Jews in military service.¹⁴¹ However, the *Historia Augusta* is considered a less reliable source, with some claiming the author may have invented some of its content and sources.¹⁴² Nevertheless, this does not detract from the importance of this source as evidence for considerable Jewish military service in the 3rd century CE, since even if the author fabricated some details, they would have had to rely on the established truths of their period. Thus, there is no sufficient reason for the author to write that one of the languages of a military dedication belonged to the Jews unless it was genuine, or at least feasible, as Jews served in large numbers during the 3rd century CE. This is also supported by mentioning “Egyptian letters” as the presence of Egyptians, like Jews, are well attested in the Roman army. Moreover, the inclusion of Egyptian writing is strong evidence that the writing in the mentioned inscription was meant to represent the languages of the soldiers who dedicated it, and not necessarily local languages to make the inscription comprehensible for passers-by and other audiences. This is because while Jews and Persians were local to the area, and not only serving in the Roman army, Egyptians were the latter and not the former. Therefore, it clearly indicates that the author of this part in the *Historia Augusta* was familiar with who formed the ranks of the eastern Roman army and thus referred to them. Despite coming from a less-than-reliable source, this extract is genuine evidence for the realia of the day, mentioned unintentionally, and is one of the strongest pieces of evidence for the large presence of Jewish soldiers in the Roman army of the day.

One of the best places that is indicative of this extensive Jewish enlistment is Dura-Europos. This city was abandoned after its conquest in 256 CE by Shapur I, the King of Persia, who was the same ruler against whom Gordian III died fighting. The town’s Roman defenders fortified the city by filling the buildings near the walls with earth and rubble, thus protecting them from the enemy and from the ravages of time, exceptionally preserving the ancient structures abutting the walls. The Syrian desert sands subsequently covered this city, preserving it as it was during Odaenathus’ era. As a border town between the Roman and Persian Empires, the city had a considerable Roman military presence, with archaeological excavations discovering that the Roman military compound comprised a quarter to a third of the city.¹⁴³ Furthermore, numerous temples dedicated to various gods and faiths

¹⁴¹ It is not clear if the language attested was Hebrew or Aramaic, but it was attributed to the Jews. The translations, which translate it as Hebrew, are interpreting it anachronistically, as did David Golan in his translation of the text into Hebrew: Golan 2014, 139.

¹⁴² Johnson 2013, 355.

¹⁴³ James 2019, 255–258.

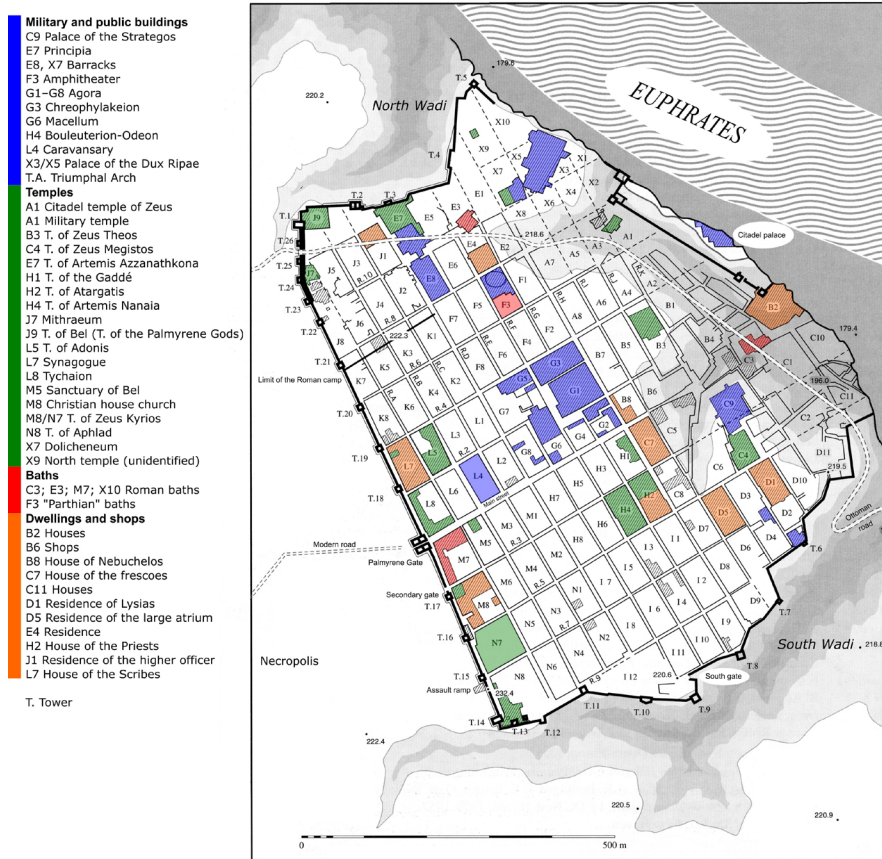
Dura-Europos general excavations plan

Fig. 6: Dura-Europos' general excavations plan (©Artem.G/Wikimedia commons).

were excavated, including the synagogue,¹⁴⁴ often identified as building L 7 (fig. 6), which was located adjacent to the western wall of the city (fig. 7), two streets south of the military compound.

Since a significant part of the population was the garrison, it was proposed that the synagogue functioned as a place of worship for Jewish soldiers.¹⁴⁵ The argument was further elaborated when the wall paintings inside the synagogue were

¹⁴⁴ There is extensive literature on the synagogue. The most important is: Kraeling et al. 1956.

¹⁴⁵ Rosenfeld – Potchebutzky 2009, 195–222; in the appendix to Rocca's article, he mentioned the former: Rocca 2010, 26.

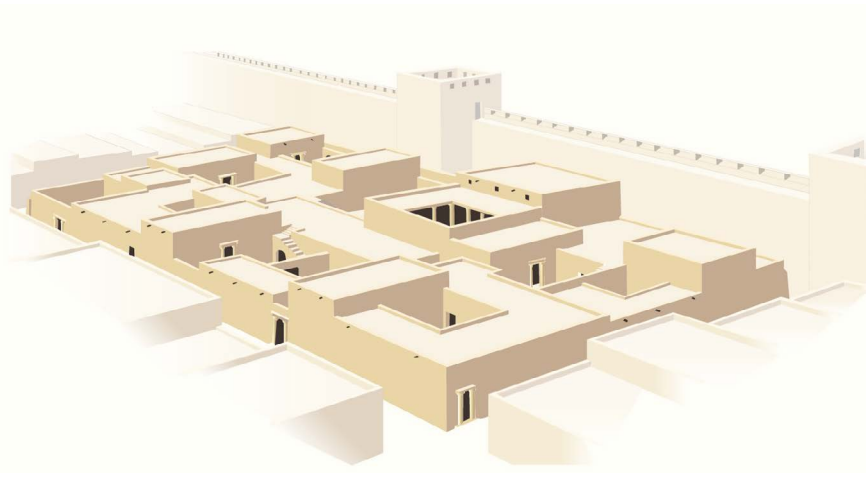


Fig. 7: Isometric view of Block L 7, Dura-Europos, with the Synagogue in its centre (©Marsyas/Wikimedia commons).

discussed in an even more comprehensive way.¹⁴⁶ These paintings purportedly depict Biblical scenes, with some figures anachronistically dressed in Roman military uniforms and equipment from the 3rd century CE (fig. 8–11). One suggestion for this phenomenon is that members of the Jewish community, or the painter himself, served in the military.¹⁴⁷ Another possibility is the painter depicted Roman soldiers because they were a visible part of daily life in Dura-Europos. Yet, the proximity of the synagogue to the garrison suggests Jewish Roman soldiers, military suppliers and passing merchants (given the city's location along the ancient Silk Road) likely attended religious services in the synagogue.

Furthermore, the prevalence of depictions of military personnel at Dura-Europos, coupled with the proximity of the synagogue to the Roman garrison, implies a substantial proportion of the Jewish congregation was Jewish military men, serving among the units stationed in the town. This aspect is further reiterated in various military documents uncovered in this city.

Some of these documents, belonging to XX Palmyrenorum, a Roman military unit that originated from Palmyra and was stationed in Dura-Europos, contained many general Semitic names that were used by Jews. For example: Aurel(ius) Salmanes¹⁴⁸ Bannaḡei, [A]ḡrel(ius) Baḡnaeus, Aurel(ius) B[a]rṣi[ms]us, Ṣalmeṣ

¹⁴⁶ Regarding the wall paintings, see: Hachlili 2010; Weisman 2012; Olshanetsky 2022.

¹⁴⁷ Weisman 2012.

¹⁴⁸ P.Dura 122 = ChLA IX 377 = Rom.Mil.Rec. 32.



Fig. 8: Wall painting from the Dura-Europos synagogue's Northern wall, showing the battle of Eben Ezer, right part of the depiction (Gillerman slides collection [Yale], Adapted by Marsyas, Wikimedia commons).



Fig. 9: Wall painting from the Dura-Europos synagogue's Northern wall, showing the battle of Eben Ezer, left part of the depiction showing the Ark being taken (Gillerman slides collection [Yale], adapted by Marsyas, Wikimedia commons).



Fig. 10: Jews cross the Red Sea pursued by Pharaoh. A fresco from the Dura-Europos synagogue (©Becklectic/Wikimedia commons).



Fig. 11: Murder of the prophet, Zechariah ben Jehoiada, from the Dura-Europos synagogue (©Wikimedia commons).

Mālchi, šalmus An[...],¹⁴⁹ Malchū[s] Z]ehīda, Seleucu[s] M]ālchi, Mal[c]hūs Mōmbogei, Aurē[l(ius)] Bārbesomeniūs,¹⁵⁰ Goremis] İadei,¹⁵¹ Iulius Salman, Themarsas Salman, Zebidaş İadei.¹⁵² However, these names are not necessarily Jewish. These names, while reminiscent of biblical Hebrew names, are universal Semitic names that could also be associated with pagan deities, a common occurrence in the region.¹⁵³ Another name found in the military records of Dura-Europos, Aurel(ius) Maesomas Aciba,¹⁵⁴ bears similarity to that of the renowned Rabbi Akiva,¹⁵⁵ though it may have also been used by gentiles. On the other hand, there are names more strongly associated with Jews that are often used as definitive evidence of Jewish faith, like Iaqlubus,¹⁵⁶ and A[u]rēl(ius) Og[a]ş Haniņa.¹⁵⁷

The presence of Jewish soldiers in Dura-Europos is well substantiated, but assessing the size of the Jewish community is integral to gauge their influence in the region. For example, the synagogue's renovation and expansion in 245 CE, doubling its capacity to accommodate 120 male worshippers, underscores the growing influence of the Jewish community in Dura-Europos. Yet, beyond the formal seating, additional space on the floor or possibly wooden chairs, along with the courtyard, allowed a larger congregation to attend services. Furthermore, the synagogue was a relatively new institution during this period and, likely, most Jews did not visit one. It also remains unknown whether there were other unidentified synagogues, and not all Jews were present in the city at every given moment. However, assuming several hundred Jewish adult men lived in the city, with a quarter to a third possibly serving as soldiers, similar to the percentage of soldiers out of the city's general population, will imply that 10 % or more of the permanent garrison could

149 P.Dura 6 = ChLA VII 322 = Rom.Mil.Rec. 92 = CEL I 200.

150 P.Dura 117 = ChLA IX 372 = Rom.Mil.Rec. 33.

151 P.Dura 103 = ChLA IX 358 = Rom.Mil.Rec. 26.

152 P.Dura 101 = ChLA VIII 356 = Rom.Mil.Rec. 2.

153 Can be found in the mentioned documents in the previous and following notes, as well as in: P.Dura 104 = ChLA IX 359 = Rom.Mil.Rec. 3; P.Dura 97 = ChLA VII 352 = Rom.Mil.Rec. 83 = CPL 325; P.Dura 66 = ChLA VI 321 A = Rom.Mil.Rec. 89 No. 1 = CEL I 191 (1); P.Dura 82 = ChLA VII 337 = Rom.Mil.Rec. 47; P.Dura 8 = ChLA VII 338 = Rom.Mil.Rec. 48 = CPL 339; P.Dura 89 = ChLA VII 344 = Rom.Mil.Rec. 50 = CPL 331; P.Dura 95 = ChLA VII 350 = Rom.Mil.Rec. 66; P.Dura 102 = ChLA IX 357 = Rom.Mil.Rec. 8; P.Dura 103 = ChLA IX 358 = Rom.Mil.Rec. 26; P.Dura 106 = ChLA IX 361 = Rom.Mil.Rec. 13; P.Dura 107 = ChLA IX 362 = Rom.Mil.Rec. 15; P.Dura 114 = ChLA IX 369 = Rom.Mil.Rec. 41; ChLA 7 324 = P.Dura 69 = Rom.Mil.Rec. 95; ChLA 7 324 = P.Dura 69 = Rom.Mil.Rec. 95.

154 P.Dura 100 = ChLA VIII 355 = Rom.Mil.Rec. 1 = CPL 335; Appear also in: P.Dura 101 = ChLA VIII 356 = Rom.Mil.Rec. 2.

155 On Rabbi Akiva, see for example: Holtz 2017.

156 P.Dura 118 = ChLA IX 373 = Rom.Mil.Rec. 44.

157 P.Dura 100 = ChLA VIII 355 = Rom.Mil.Rec. 1 = CPL 335; Appear also in: P.Dura 101 = ChLA VIII 356 = Rom.Mil.Rec. 2.

have been Jewish, given the estimated garrison size of 1000–2000 soldiers in the late 2nd century CE.¹⁵⁸

Despite the sizable Jewish population and military presence in Dura-Europos, it appears some of this community, especially the congregation of the infamous synagogue, diverged from the doctrines of the Rabbinic tradition. This divergence is particularly emphasised by the synagogue's wall paintings, a practice forbidden by the Rabbis of Judaea/Palaestina. In addition, the synagogue in Dura-Europos notably featured a Torah book niche (fig. 12–13), a characteristic possibly originating from Syria and not appearing in Judaea/Palaestina until a century or more later. This suggestive transfer of architectural elements from Syria to Judaea/Palaestina indicates the extensive influence of Syrian Jewish communities. Additionally, the presence of both the niche and the murals underscores a divergence from Rabbinic authority among the Syrian Jews,¹⁵⁹ aligning more closely with Conventional Judaism. This variant of Judaism likely prevailed within Zenobia's sphere of influence, including her court, as is evident from the banquet hall which was used, or transformed into, a Jewish prayer room/synagogue, while including a mosaic with a hunting scene and Bellerophon slaying the chimaera.

Other evidence, likely dating to the 3rd century CE,¹⁶⁰ is from a burial cave in Beit She'arim. According to an inscription found within (CIIP V.2 7053), it is identified as the burial cave of Germanus (son of) Yitzchak the Palmyrene (ΓΕΡΜΑΝΟCΙΚΑΚΙΟΥ | ΠΑΛΜΥΡΗΝΟΥ). Given the burial location and the name of the deceased, it is widely concluded that Germanus was a Jew from Palmyra.¹⁶¹ At the entrance to the burial cave, the "Israel Nature and Park Authority" placed a sign claiming that it is the cave of a Jewish gladiator (fig. 14). This assumption stems from the graffito next to the inscription,¹⁶² although upon closer inspection, it is unlikely he was a gladiator. A comparison of the graffito with the stuccos and frescoes depicting gladiators reveals that his weapons and tunic differ from typical gladiatorial equipment and costume.¹⁶³ Thus, it is possible to conclude he was not a gladiator but rather a *venator* (a specialist in fighting animals in the arena, considered second to a gladi-

¹⁵⁸ James 2019, 244–255.

¹⁵⁹ Olshanetsky 2022.

¹⁶⁰ Olshanetsky 2023c, 134; the graffito and its condition, as of 2011, can be seen in: Stern 2018, 108.

¹⁶¹ Safrai 2001, 74.

¹⁶² Olshanetsky 2018b, 18; 2021a, 63; 2023c, 134–135.

¹⁶³ The spear was not a weapon used by gladiators. Moreover, gladiators had protective gear while the Germanus graffito lacks one. Regarding the equipment of gladiators, see: Nossov 2009, 44–79; regarding the importance and use of protective gear and armour by gladiators, and as a symbol of the status of gladiators, see: Haxby – Harrison – Welborn 2018, 172–174.



Fig. 12: The aedicula (Torah Shrine) in the west wall of the synagogue at Dura-Europos, 1932 (©Yale University Art Gallery/Wikimedia commons).

ator),¹⁶⁴ or a soldier.¹⁶⁵ Unfortunately, the resemblance in dress between *venatores* and the soldiers of the period makes it difficult to definitively identify Germanus as either. However, given the problematic evidence for Jewish participation as fighters

¹⁶⁴ The *venatores* seem to have used all kinds of polearms and spears. Usually, they may have not worn armour, but some of the mosaics, frescoes and stuccoes suggest that, at least in some cases, they wore a *manica* (armguard) on one of their arms. Sometimes, the only thing they wore to battle was a type of loincloth, but the most common dress was a tunic with *clavii*, very similar to the one the person engraved in the graffito is wearing. Regarding their common equipment and dress, see: Nossov 2009, 48–54.

¹⁶⁵ Mazar originally excavated the place and was the first to suggest that Germanus was a soldier, yet he did so without much explanation: Mazar 1973, 182–183, plate 36; The graffito in Germanus' cave is almost identical to the depiction of Roman soldiers from the mosaics found in the Villa Romana Del Casale, a Roman villa uncovered near the town of Piazza Armerina in Sicily. The mosaics can be seen in: Mistretta 1998; Gonzales Salinero lately claimed he was definitely a soldier, yet completely disregarding the *venator* option is problematic: González-Salinero 2022, 66–67.



Fig. 13: Ciborium of the Holy Ark of the synagogue of Dura-Europos (©Marsyas/Wikimedia commons).

in the arena,¹⁶⁶ alongside the substantial evidence of Jewish military service,¹⁶⁷ the option that he was a soldier is equally, if not more probable, and highly relevant to the current discussion. It is even possible he was a Jewish soldier in the Palmyrene army during Zenobia's reign as they probably wore tunics similar to those of the Roman Soldiers. Thus, he may even be one of the Jewish Palmyrene soldiers mentioned by Benjamin of Tudela.

¹⁶⁶ Olshanetsky 2021a, 2021c, 2023c; while there is no clear evidence for Jewish gladiators, and questionable evidence for Jewish *venatores*, there is ample evidence of Jews going to watch the games.

¹⁶⁷ Regarding Jews in Roman armies, the articles and chapters offering a wider perspective (presented in chronological order), are: Applebaum 1965; Castritius 2002; González-Salineró 2003; Oppenheimer 2005b; 2005a, 183–191; Schoenfeld 2006; Roth 2007; Chomiak 2008; Rocca 2010; Weisman 2012; Olshanetsky 2018a, 2021b; González-Salineró 2022; Olshanetsky 2023a, 2023b; other articles that deal with specific, or a few, finds but do not deal with the general phenomenon of Jewish military service: Applebaum 1970b, 1970a, 1971; Woods 1992; Scharf 1997; Ecker 2022.

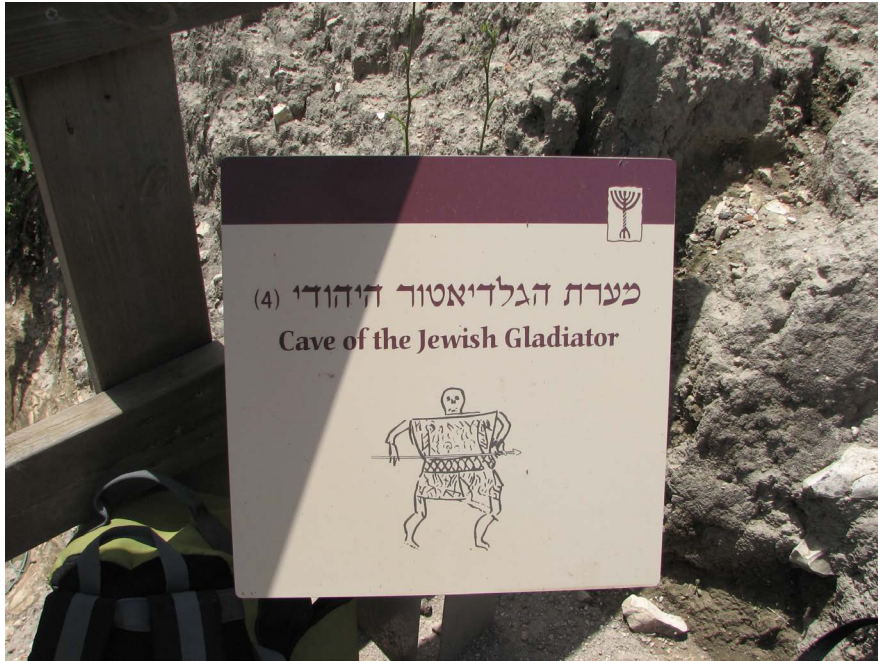


Fig. 14: The sign outside the cave of Germanus in the Bet She'arim National Park (©Hanay/Wikimedia Commons).

One of the Roman Empire's adversaries, the Persians, suggested the presence of Jewish soldiers in the Roman army during the 3rd century CE through Shapur I's inscription on the Ka'ba-ye Zartosht (the Kaba of Zoroaster) in Naqsh-e Rostam. This inscription records his victories in three languages, Parthian, Greek, and Sassanid-Persian,¹⁶⁸ listing numerous territories from which the defeated Roman soldiers originated, thereby highlighting Shapur's capability to conquer the entire Roman world. The information in the inscription appears to have been gleaned from Roman officers taken prisoner in the battle of Edessa.¹⁶⁹ The inscription mentions many territories including Syria alongside Phoenicia, Judaea, Arabia, and Mauritania. "Judaea" is an interesting term to use, as following the Second Jewish Revolt, commonly and probably inappropriately known as the Bar Kokhba Revolt (131–136 CE),¹⁷⁰ the Romans punitively attempted to replace the name

¹⁶⁸ Sprengling 1940, 344.

¹⁶⁹ Sprengling 1940, 371–378.

¹⁷⁰ Olshanetsky 2024b.

Judaea with “Palaestina” or “Lower Syria,” aiming to erase Jewish national identity and pride.¹⁷¹

The term Judaea could have been used for several reasons. One possibility is that Roman prisoners identified themselves by their cities of origins, and the Persians soldiers and clerks, who created the list and some of whom may have been Jewish, opted for the Jewish name of the territory, i.e. Judaea. Another possibility is that some captured Roman soldiers were Jewish, and the Persian soldiers associated them with Judaea. A third option is that Jewish Roman soldiers from Judaea preferred to use the Jewish name for the territory. It is even possible they emphasised their Jewish identity, knowing there were Jews in the Persian army, and thus hoping for better treatment.

The inscription warrants in-depth analysis to determine the most probable interpretation. Primarily, Judaea is not the only place mentioned without reference to the Roman provincial system. Phoenicia, for example, is also listed in this manner, just before Judaea. Yet, the term Judaea is explicitly used in both the Greek (Ιουδαία),¹⁷² Parthian (Yutaya),¹⁷³ and Sassanid-Persian (Yxudya),¹⁷⁴ versions of the inscription. The use of the term “Judaea,” which no non-Jewish Roman would have employed, strongly suggests a connection to Jewish soldiers.¹⁷⁵ This implies the term was used to denote Jews, not merely the geographic region. Moreover, the term’s appearance in all three languages, each inscribed by different clerks and craftsmen, supports a combination of the aforementioned reasons. It is possible that there were Jewish soldiers from Judaea, and from other territories who resisted using the term Palaestina, and so Jewish soldiers from other territories were included under the term “Judaea.” At the same time, this term, like “Phoenicia,” aimed to represent all regions and peoples comprising the Roman force. Furthermore, the term’s use in all three languages underscores the presence of Jewish soldiers and officials in the Persian Empire’s service.

There is further evidence from the 3rd and 4th centuries, including inscriptions and various texts, indicating considerable Jewish military service during this period. Unfortunately, due to the scope of this current article, it is advisable to refer to the existing literature for a comprehensive discussion on this topic.¹⁷⁶ Extensive

171 Lewis 1982, 58–60.

172 Sprengling 1940, 374.

173 Sprengling 1940, 373.

174 Sprengling 1940, 375.

175 Weisman 2012, 25–26.

176 For the possibility that Jewish service in the armies of the Empire was continuous, at least until the middle of the fifth century CE, see: Olshanetsky 2018b; the new book by González Salinero, and an article of mine, that were recently published, are currently the most extensive presentation of a significant amount of the available evidence. In addition, these publications prove, beyond

Jewish military service in the 3rd and 4th centuries CE supports the suggestions and assumptions raised in this article, and helps explain why the Jewish population of the eastern Empire was considered when mustering support in the east. This context elucidates some of Zenobia's choices and preferences. The continued Jewish military presence, and the importance of the Jewish community in Palmyra, as evidenced by Benjamin of Tudela's account of local Palmyrene Jews fighting alongside their neighbours, illustrate the enduring Jewish presence in Palmyra and their propensity for serving foreign rulers militarily, and Queen Zenobia in particular.

Discussion and Conclusions

As shown, multiple texts assert Queen Zenobia's Jewish identity or conversion, particularly within discussions concerning Paul of Samosata. While these accounts are not entirely accurate, they likely stem from an ancient tradition dating back to the late 3rd century CE that is possibly grounded in historical fact. Significantly, some of these texts portray Zenobia neutrally or positively, thus further indicating the historical underpinnings of this tradition. Therefore, it is possible to speculate that either Zenobia converted to Judaism, or at least dabbled with the religion, particularly when considering the account by Photios of Constantinople. This text, though relatively late, draws from numerous ancient sources, some of which are lost, and offers a unique perspective devoid of the discourse on Zenobia's connection with Paul of Samosata. Considering these factors and the unique phrasing of the text, Photios' account holds relative credibility as a source. Moreover, the account he probably based his entry upon was probably very ancient, possibly even from Zenobia's time. This ancient account may have also been the source for her Jewishness that earlier Christian texts linking Zenobia with Paul of Samosata mentioned, as they merged two separate facts unrelated to each other: her partiality to Judaism and Paul's acts or heresy. In the Christian texts, Queen Zenobia is claimed to be the catalyst for his heresy, even though this is historically impossible. Thus, the possibility his unconnected heresy was mixed with ancient accounts of her Jewish preferences is legitimate. Otherwise, if the story was fiction, it would be more logical and natural for the author to claim that Paul's heresy of Artemon was encouraged by Queen Zenobia's heresy of Artemon. Hence, the information on her Jewish inclination, came from a different source most probably unconnected to Paul of Samo-

any doubt, that extensive Jewish service existed in the Roman armies at least from the middle of the first century BCE until the fifth century CE, and even possibly until the sixth century to some extent: Olshanetsky 2021b; González-Salinero 2022.

sata. Photios used this source, which was contemporary to Zenobia's reign, to create a more historically reliable entry separated from Paul of Samosata.

Furthermore, the absence of commentary on Zenobia's conversion from Rabbinic sources should not be employed as evidence against her conversion. This sect's view on conversion and women, as well as their fraught relationship with Zenobia, stresses that her conversion would not have been a suitable topic of discussion in the Talmud. Nevertheless, the Rabbis' discussions on the converted Jews of Palmyra highlight the local community's acceptance and possible promotion of conversion, as well as underscoring the Rabbis' vehement opposition to conversion, particularly from Palmyra, more so than for any other region. These texts also indicate Queen Zenobia's occasional interference in Jewish politics, including the arrest of certain Rabbis. These actions likely stemmed from her governance of the region and her alignment with a different form of Judaism prevalent in Syria, often mislabelled as Hellenistic Judaism and should be more accurately defined as Conventional Judaism. Accordingly, the lack of mention of her conversion or authority over the Jews in Rabbinic sources is unsurprising and rather expected.

The Jewish community of Palmyra stood as one of antiquity's most formidable, affluent, and influential Jewish communities outside of Judaea, second only to the one in the city of Rome. This prominence is underscored by the abundance of evidence for this society, particularly flourishing during the reign of Odaenathus and Zenobia. The tensions between Palmyrene Jews, their proclivity for conversion, and their support and influence on Zenobia, alongside her ideological stance, instilled a profound hostility among the Rabbis toward Palmyra and its inhabitants. This antagonism persisted through subsequent centuries, evident in Rabbinic texts spanning beyond Zenobia's era.

Queen Zenobia's affinity with monotheism, and particularly Judaism, can be contextualized within her quest for support and manpower in her campaigns to expand her dominion over parts of the Empire, or even to challenge its entirety. The rising popularity of monotheism, fuelled by the growing influence of Christianity and Judaism, alongside the evolution of pagan beliefs toward monotheistic tendencies, presented an evident and strategic choice for Zenobia.

With regards to the preference of Judaism over Christianity, the latter religion was still largely illegal, while Judaism had widespread appeal and influence. Therefore, choosing to align herself with Judaism was a logical and prudent strategic move for Zenobia, and she was not the first, nor last, royal to dabble or convert to Judaism. It is also possible that Zenobia may have genuinely preferred Judaism over the different religious options. Nevertheless, Zenobia's reluctance to openly convert to Judaism, despite the prevalence of Jews in the region and the Roman army, could stem from her need to maintain ambiguity in her monotheistic stance to retain the loyalty of various ethnic and religious groups within her empire. Her

defeat and subsequent captivity may have prevented her from fully deciding on one course of action, and possibly realising her plans to unite her empire under a single leading monotheistic religion, possibly a unified form of Judaism that would have demoted the influence of the Rabbis, which never manifested.

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