

facts, to know precisely how things happened in an almost tangible fashion: What concatenations of actions made events happen in the way that they did? Where were people located? Precisely how many of them were there? And what, precisely, was it that they did? As a skeptic, he held that arguments were to be built up slowly by severe inquiry and by collations of data, a calm if somewhat unexciting procedure from pragmatic inquiry to firmer knowledge. But David Hume was as deeply aware of — if as deeply distressed by — the ‘irrational’ elements of human behaviour, particularly religious ones, that were so evident in the historical process. Although they were very alien to his own nature, he knew that these sides of the human record had to be confronted. That would mean fully understanding Apuleius’ experience as a provincial member of a world state as a profoundly religious one in which magical power, belief in the recuperative aura of a Graeco-Egyptian goddess, and the inner knowledge of neo-Platonic teachings were as central to the cultural transformations of empire as was Apuleius’ place in its social and political order. Not least of all, it would also demand an understanding of emperors who were not just rational bureaucrats responding within a petition system, but who were also the living embodiments of behavior that was profoundly ‘irrational’ in Hume’s sense.⁸ They were icons of authority who acted out their own, sometimes very idiosyncratic notions of reality — many of them more deadly than any of Mr. Humbert Humbert’s perversions — and arbitrarily imposed them on both court and society. More than a few of the emperors’ subjects believed in their transcendent powers of healing, mantic insights, and the reality of their life-after-death. Of course, Hume, too, the historian, never resolved the problems caused by such ‘irrational’ human behaviour. It was one cost of his too enlightened view of humanity.

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Yasmine Zahran, *Zenobia between Reality and Legend*. BAR International Series, vol. 1169. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003. xvi + 130 pp. 60 figures. ISBN 1 84171 537 9.

Zenobia is history, though seemingly, she defies historical interpretation. At the same time, Zenobia is a myth, in the West no less than in the East. Any attempt to deal with her as a character and as a historical figure inevitably has to deal with the mythical and legendary constructions of the past — of a remote as well as a quite recent past. This challenge has now been taken by Yasmine Zahran, whose portrait of the Palmyrene queen is, rather than a proper scholarly work, essentially a literary essay (though published in the highly academic BAR series and equipped with references and annotations). Hence the book’s dialogic structure, oscillating between ‘auto-biography’ (written by Zenobia herself as a fictional I-narrator) and author’s commentary.

Until 1993, when Fergus Millar’s epochal *The Roman Near East* was published, modern ancient historians generally followed the patterns of interpretation provided by the ancient sources. Millar’s scepticism put forward a radically different paradigm: Zenobia and her son

propositions that mean absolutely nothing at all, and therefore he is deeply concerned with the powerful mind’s capacity to delude itself with absurdity’.

⁸ It would be informative, for example, to compare R. Kapuscinski, *The Emperor*, transl. W. R. Brand & K. Mroczkowska-Brand, from the Polish, Cesarz, Warsaw, 1978; New York, 1983/1989, with Tacitus, and the historian’s attempt to comprehend the gross effects of monarchical power of this kind.

Vaballathus were not a threat to Roman power from the outside, aiming at the destruction of the empire, but, to put it in Roman terms, just two more usurpers in a century which was stunningly rich in successful and unsuccessful pretenders to the crown. Zenobia's and Vaballathus' 'revolt' was an 'abortive claim to the empire' (Millar), no less and no more.

One may agree with Millar's paradigm or not, but *The Roman Near East* has definitely disproven the previous dominant model of an ancient 'clash of civilisations' in Rome's eastern provinces, with a 'western' imperial culture and a rival 'oriental' one struggling for hegemony between the Mediterranean and the Tigris. In this respect the book should be a point of no return. Nevertheless, it is precisely the old-fashioned 'clash-of-civilisations' model, another historical myth owing its existence to modern western 'Orientalism', which is now warmed up by Zahran's essay.

Zenobia between Reality and Legend is in fact a tribute to the legend and has nothing to do with anything like 'reality', whatever that might be. To be just, the book is an immensely eloquent, readable, suggestive and even poetic tribute, but this makes it no better as a work of scholarship. Zenobia's poetic self-reflection on her death in the beginning is a mere overture to what becomes the leitmotiv of the whole book: the struggle between the good (Palmyra, the 'Arabs' and Zenobia in particular) and the wicked (Rome, its imperialism and its barbaric emperor Aurelian in particular).

The weak spot of Zahran's book is not that she puts her model first and the sources, of whatever kind, second (this is, in the reviewer's opinion, rather an achievement). Its Achilles' heel is not even that she claims a 'reality' beyond the 'evidence' (which is, after all, far from being illegitimate and, in the age of post-structuralism, virtually inevitable). Inexcusable is her model itself, the post-French-Revolution paradigm of *la nation une et indivisible* applied by her to the pre-Islamic Arabs, whose very existence as an identity group is, to say the least, doubtful. Whatever the 'Arabs' of Zenobia's and Aurelian's times were, they were certainly no 'nation' in the modern sense, disposing of a firmly established common identity.

Zahran, however, takes precisely this 'Arab' identity for granted. Zenobia, according to her, had a dream for which she challenged Rome, and this dream was an "Arab empire" (p. 27), to be realised, as a first step, as a 'Pan-Hellenic Orient' (ibid.). Whatever Pan-Hellenism meant to contemporaries, it was certainly no anti-Roman 'ideology' to be used by Rome's enemies as a means of mobilisation. Furthermore, the Arab identity of Palmyra itself is questionable. True, some personal names link Palmyra to the Arab peninsula and the Nabataeans in the *provincia Arabia* and some deities of the Palmyrene pantheon do the same. And admittedly classical authors such as Strabo label the people inhabiting the Syro-Arabian steppe as *Arabes te kai skenitai*. But the terms *Arabes* and *Arabia* are overwhelmingly iridescent. Trying to find out their precise meaning is a tantalising task. Do they designate a certain way of life, that of a nomad (which may be the case, though the use of the terms is far from consistent)? Or rather a precise location (which raises the problem that virtually dozens of locations in the Near East bore the toponym *Arabia*)? Or the Syro-Arabian steppe as such? Or the Arabian peninsula, or its southern part, the Arabia Felix? Or even the entire Near East? For sheer ignorance we should use terms like 'Arab' when talking about the Roman Near East with all due caution.

Along with the general methodological problems go a number of minor errors, none of which is inexcusable, but which, in the end, reveal the author's unfamiliarity with the subject as such. More than being a study in Zenobia, the supposedly Arab queen of tragic fate, the book is therefore a document of the modern Near East's tragedy, its myths, its resentments, and its paranoia.