DEMONIZING ZENOBIA: THE LEGEND OF AL-ZABBĀ’ IN ISLAMIC SOURCES

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Cenobia, of Palymerie Queene
As written persiens of hir noblesse,
So worthy was in armes and so keene,
That no wight passed hire in hardynesse
Ne in lynage, ne in oother gentillesse.
Chaucer, The Canterbury Tales

Introduction

Since the beginnings of recorded history, most Near Eastern polities have been ruled by kings, although women have on occasion risen to positions of power and authority. Some of these women are legendary,¹ others historical.²

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¹ After hearing of the wisdom of King Solomon, the unnamed queen of the land of Sheba traveled to Israel bearing gifts of spices, gold and precious stones (I Kings 10:1-13; cf. II Chronicles 9:1-12); Josephus adds that she held power over Ethiopia and Egypt. A woman named Nitocris—if she existed—was reportedly the last Pharaoh of the sixth Egyptian dynasty, possibly the first known queen regnant in recorded history, and the first of three women who assumed the title of Pharaoh. She is mentioned in the Histories of Herodotus and writings of Manetho. According to Herodotus (Histories ii), following the assassination of her brother, the king of Egypt, Nitocris invited the murderers to a banquet and killed them by sealing the room and flooding it with water drawn from the Nile; so as not to be killed by additional conspirators, she committed suicide. Alas, there is no mention of Nitocris in any Egyptian inscriptions and historians now think that she has been confused with the male king Netjerkare Siptah I, about whom documentary evidence does exist. Another legendary figure is Elissa/Dido, who according to Junianus Justinus (3d century BCE) and Virgil (d. 19 BCE), fled Tyre and made her way to North Africa, where ca. 800 BCE she founded the city of Carthage and became its first queen.

² In the ancient Near East, many women served as regents for their sons and some of them eventually took power in their own names. Among the Hittites of Anatolia (ca. 1300 BCE) the queen ruled for life, first as crown princess and, after the death of her husband, in the office called Tawananna. Among the Assyrians, the

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Prior to the rise of Islam, the Arabs would have been familiar with several queens whose existence is a matter of historical record. Arguably the best-known and most famous Arab queen was Zenobia, who ruled the city-state of Palmyra as its queen from 267-72 CE. During this period, armies commanded by the Arab queen conquered Egypt and much of Asia Minor. In response to this threat, the Roman emperor marched across Anatolia to Syria, where he defeated the queen’s forces in two major battles, first at Antioch and then at Palmyra. Zenobia was captured and transported to Rome, where she ended her days under house arrest.

Famous in life, Zenobia was even more famous in death. From Palmyra, accounts of her exploits spread outwards. In the West she came to be known for her beauty, valor, and chastity. In Syria and Iraq the local population never forgot that imperial forces once marched under the flag of an Arab queen. In the middle of the 6th century CE Zenobia was known to the inhabitants of al-Ḥijrat. That she was known to Muhammad and the early Muslim community in the Hijaz is suggested by the fact that two of Muhammad’s wives and one of his daughters bore the name Zaynab, which is the Arabic...


3 Assyrian records mention Zabibi queen of Aribi, a mighty Arab warrior queen who revolted and was subdued in 738 BCE. Queen Samsi the Midianite (r. 740-20 BCE) fought the Assyrian king Tiglath-Pileser III and was eventually defeated and forced to pay tribute. She was succeeded by Queen Yatî (r. ca. 730 BCE) who, in turn, was succeeded by Queen Telkhanu, who controlled the deserts of eastern Syria and Jordan from her capital at Adurna. In the last half of the first century CE, Shaqilath ruled the Nabateans for five years during the minority of her son al-Rabil (r. 70-106). Al-Rabil’s sister Gamilath also was queen of the Nabateans. See N. Abbott, “Pre-Islamic Arab Queens,” The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures, 58:1 (1941): 1-22.


5 For a brief summary of the representation of Zenobia in Western literature by the likes of Boccaccio, Chaucer, Lord Tennyson, and others, see Stoneman, Palmyra and its Empire, 197-200. Re Zenobia’s chastity: It is said that she limited her sexual liaisons with her husband to the days immediately following the completion of her menstrual cycle, when she could be certain that she was fertile; once she became pregnant, she would not engage in sexual relations with her husband until after the child was born, and even then, according to the same rules (ibid.: 113-14).