Emesa in Roman Syria: Resistance, Rebellion and Regionalism in the Third Century AD

The third century AD was not a happy time in the Roman East. Whether or not we can legitimately refer to a ‘third century crisis’ in the Roman Empire, there is no doubt that the inhabitants of Roman Syria would have viewed much of this time as a period of chronic instability. In the period from the death of Alexander Severus in 235 to the re-establishment of order in the East by Aurelian in 273, the provinces of Syria and Mesopotamia suffered Persian invasion, political uncertainty, frequent imperial usurpations and profound economic crisis. In such circumstances it is hardly surprising that local authorities such as the Palmyrenes Odaenathus and Zenobia despaired of help from the central government and chose to take matters into their own hands: it is probable that they thought they had little choice.

When one reviews the history of Eastern imperial usurpations in the third century, and combines this with accounts of Syrian resistance to the invasions of the Persian King Shapur I, some striking trends emerge. As local authorities and figures struggled to cope with the Persian threat and seemingly despaired of Roman help, the names of two cities emerge as centers of anti-Persian resistance and (not unrelated) imperial pretensions: Emesa and Palmyra. By contrast, the great metropoleis, fortress cities and legionary bases of Syria and Mesopotamia are supine

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1 D.S. Potter, Prophecy and History in the Crisis of the Roman Empire: A Historical Commentary on the Thirteenth Sibylline Oracle (Oxford 1990), 6-17.

2 For an excellent study of these usurpations and the role of the army in them see J. Eadie, ‘One Hundred Years of Rebellion: The Eastern Army in Politics AD 175-272’ in: D.L. Kennedy (ed.), The Roman Army in the East (Ann Arbor 1996), 135-151.
throughout this period, and present no meaningful resistance to Persian raids. When the Persians advance, a whole string of these cities are taken and sacked: when the Persians retreat, no offensive is organized or real resistance offered until the Emperor himself appears on the scene, usually some considerable time after the beginning of the war. Unlike such great cities as Antioch, or the legionary bases of Zeugma, Raphanaea and Apamea, the cities of Emesa and Palmyra figure frequently throughout this time as active players in local resistance to the Persians.

Of these two, the episode of the short-lived ‘Palmyrene Empire’ of the late 260s and early 270s is well known and is reasonably well represented in our sources, by third century standards at least. Before the sudden and spectacular emergence of Palmyra as a major player in the East, however, it is the name of Emesa that crops up with striking regularity in the (admittedly quite poor) historical sources for this period. The purpose of this paper, then, will be to provide a brief historical overview of the involvement of Emesa in imperial usurpations and anti-Persian resistance in the third century AD, and then to examine why it was that Emesa was able to take the role that it did. Also, the possible effects and influences of these Emesene activities on the rise and fall of Palmyra as an independent power will be examined.3

Historical Overview

After the disappearance of the independent Emesene monarchy in the late first century AD,4 the name of Emesa is scarcely visible in the

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EMESA IN ROMAN SYRIA

sources throughout the second century. Some Greek inscriptions are known from Emesa in this period, and the city minted coins from the time of Antoninus Pius onwards, but otherwise there is virtually no evidence to indicate the nature of Emesene society and politics through most of the second century. All this, however, comes to an end in about AD 190, when the first of a series of political events involving Emesa begin to unfold, not ceasing until Aurelian’s crushing of Palmyrene independence in AD 272. A brief chronological overview of these events is provided below.

Julius Alexander (c. AD 190). Dio records that a citizen of Emesa named Julius Alexander was sentenced to death by Commodus for a perceived personal slight. The account informs us that Alexander killed his assassins and fled from Emesa upon hearing of the accusation, and was nearly able to make his escape. The Historia Augusta, on the other hand, states that Julius Alexander was accused of plotting rebellion in Emesa. Beyond this, we have no information about this rebellion, or even indeed whether it actually was a rebellion. Thus, it is impossible for us to infer any motives for Julius Alexander. In view of the later trend towards imperial pretensions at Emesa, it is at least not out of the question that his was the first attempt by an Emesene to raise himself to the purple.

Likewise, we know nothing about the individual himself, or whether or not he was descended from the earlier royal house of Emesa. His possession of the nomen Julius, however, indicates that his family was one of prominence at Emesa quite early. In view of the fact that the royal family itself does not appear to have been granted the citizenship until the reign of Samsigeramus II, possibly in the early first century AD, it is not likely that many other families would have received it

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5 Dio LXXIII. 14.1-3

6 SHA Comm. 8. 3
before AD 37 (and thus bear the *nomen* Julius). Accordingly, we can regard it as at least a distinct possibility that Julius Alexander was attached to the Samsigeramid house. Whether or not this would then translate into some sort of 'regionalist' motivation for the revolt (if such it was) is impossible to tell given the state of our evidence.

Elagabalus (AD 218). The next imperial usurpation at Emesa is, however, much better known and better documented. There will, accordingly, be no need to reprise it here. The usurpation of Elagabalus has generally been seen as a purely ‘Roman’ affair, motivated by imperial and dynastic concerns rather than by regional ones. It is certainly true that the imperial throne was the goal of the coup, rather than any regional interests, and if Herodian is to be believed Julia Maesa desired that the empire be ‘restored’ to her family. This would certainly seem to indicate that dynastic interests were paramount, and Maesa simply exploited the disaffection of the troops with Macrinus and their residual attachment to Caracalla to promote her candidate.

We should perhaps not, however, dismiss any regionalist interest out of hand. Dio in fact disagrees with Herodian’s view of the usurpation, claiming that neither Julia Maesa or Julia Sohaemia were aware of Varius Avitus Bassianus’ presence in the legionary camp at Raphanaea. Instead, he describes the conspirators as soldiers of the

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8 This argument also, of course, applies to the family of Julius Bassianus, Julia Domna *et al.* Even if not related to the former royal house, Alexander may have been nonetheless related to the family of Bassianus. See A.R. Birley, *Septimius Severus: The African Emperor* (rev. ed. New Haven 1989), 81.

9 Dio LXXIX. 30-38; Herodian V. 3-4; SHA *Macrinus* 9-10


11 Herodian V. 3. 9-11
**Emesa in Roman Syria**

*Legio III Gallica* accompanied by some *bouleutai* of Emesa, led by Gannys, the lover of Julia Sohaemia. The motivation of the soldiers can presumably be ascribed to their disaffection with Macrinus, but what interest would the councilors of Emesa have? Of course, they would no doubt have been expecting handsome rewards if their fellow Emesene were to be raised to the purple, but is this the only motivation we can ascribe to them?

During the reigns of Septimius Severus and Caracalla, most of the important cities of Syria had received a great deal of patronage, and in some cases grants of colonial status, while many influential Syrian families were adlected into the Senatorial and Equestrian orders. Although the East was not the only area to benefit from Severan patronage, there is no doubt that the societies of Roman Syria were important beneficiaries of Severan largesse, helped no doubt by his wife’s Emesene origins and perhaps also by Severus’ own Punic background. Thus, the great families of Emesa and perhaps also those of other cities would possibly have been keen to see the imperial office given back to the family of Julia Maesa, whether she knew about it or not. *Their* interest would have been to ensure that the imperial patronage of their cities and their political careers would continue: no doubt they had few illusions that it would do so under Macrinus.

Whether or not this was the case, we hear no more of Emesa being involved in disaffection and rebellion until the middle of the third century, when it is involved in a series of events between AD 244 and 272. No doubt the good citizens of Emesa were generally happy with their situation while Elagabalus and Severus Alexander were in power, and we do not hear of them under Maximinus or Gordian III either. It was not, in fact, until the coming of another inhabitant of the Roman

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12 Dio LXXIX. 31. 2-4

East to the throne that Emesa once again comes to the fore in an insurrection against the reigning emperor.

Iotapianus (AD 244-9). The insurrection of Iotapianus occurred, according to Zosimus, as a result of the exactions of Julius Priscus, the Rector Orientis (and brother) of the Emperor Philip the Arab.\textsuperscript{14} These exactions appear to have been necessitated by the enormous ransom which Philip paid to Shapur to extract the Roman army from the aftermath of Gordian III’s expedition in 244. Not surprisingly, the locals of Syria were unhappy, and their disaffection found its focus in the revolt led by Iotapianus. He was not able to attract any significant support outside Syria, but he minted coins at Emesa and continued to be active in Syria and Cappadocia until he was suppressed during the reign of Decius.\textsuperscript{15}

Aurelius Victor states that Iotapianus was a descendant of Alexander, by which he presumably meant Alexander Severus.\textsuperscript{16} This would therefore indicate his association with Emesa’s foremost family in the third century, which itself may (although, as noted above, there is no concrete proof) imply association with the former royal house, the Samsigeramids. Indeed, as Potter notes, the name Iotapianus itself may be a Samsigeramid dynastic name, as some female members of the royal house had been called Iotape.\textsuperscript{17} When making such identifications for people such as Iotapianus or Uranius Antoninus, however, we must remember that it would certainly have been seen as beneficial to those with political aspirations to claim descent from illustrious Emesene ancestors, irrespective of whether this was actually the case. Nonetheless, even if the claim of descent from Alexander Severus was untrue, along with its possible consequent linkage with the ancient royal house, it is still significant that it was thought worth making.

\textsuperscript{14} Zosimus I. 20. 2

\textsuperscript{15} Aurelius Victor 29. 2

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{17} Potter, \textit{Prophecy and History}, (n. 1 above) 248.
EMESA IN ROMAN SYRIA

As well as dissatisfaction with increased taxes, jealousy of what was seen as preferential treatment of the cities of Arabia may have played a part in lotapianus’ rebellion. The *Thirteenth Sibylline Oracle* contains a section of invective against the cities of Arabia, specifically Bostra and Philipopolis (Shahba), which perhaps indicates that the resentment of the new taxes was compounded by jealousy of the better deal enjoyed by the cities of Arabia at that time.\(^\text{18}\) Given the fact that Emesa had in living memory been the recipient of such imperial largesse itself, it is not difficult to imagine the resentment that this would have occasioned there when the citizens of Emesa were being expected to bankroll Phillip’s taxes while at the same time the cities of Arabia were being enriched and beautified.

There is probably nothing specifically Emesene about this revolt, although it is conceivable that resentment of the former exalted status of Emesa being eclipsed by Philipopolis and Bostra may have played a part. Certainly, however, we can point to Syrian interests, specifically the status of Syrian cities as compared to the cities of Arabia, as being of considerable significance in the motivations for lotapianus’ rebellion. However we view the causes and effects of lotapianus’ actions, in view of the following episode it is interesting to once again see Emesa acting as the centre of resistance and rebellion when its (or the region’s) interests are threatened.

Uranius Antoninus (AD 253-4). The episode of Uranius Antoninus has been well examined elsewhere, and it is not proposed here to go into a detailed analysis of it. It is now generally (and rightly) accepted that the Samsigeramus of John Malalas, the ‘priest sent from the sun’ of the *Thirteenth Sibylline Oracle* and the Emperor Uranius Antoninus of the numismatic evidence are all one and the same person. This person was a priest, a resident of Emesa, who organized a successful resistance to

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\(^{18}\) There was a significant program of public works at Shahba at this time, by which the village that was Philip’s birthplace was raised to the status of a city. While we do not know of any comparable works at Bostra, it is perhaps the case that it too benefited from Philip’s largesse toward his home province. See Potter, *Prophecy and History*, (n. 1 above) 250-2.
the Persian invasion of AD 252-3, and prevented the capture of his home city by Shapur’s forces. After this, perhaps in an early manifestation of the despair with the central government which led to the independent Gallic empire under Postumus and his successors as well as the independent Palmyrene empire under Zenobia, Uranus Antoninus declared himself Emperor. Later, when Valerian came to the east Antoninus seems to have sought some kind of accommodation with him, but his coins cease at this time and we do not know the conclusion to the story. Whether Antoninus was killed or (as is less likely) gave up his imperial claim and retired to private life again, it is clear that by AD 254 Valerian had fully re-established central Roman authority in the East.

For the purposes of this inquiry, it is sufficient to note at this time three factors. First, it is once again Emesa that is able to rise to the occasion and offer resistance to Shapur when all the other cities of Syria, including the legionary bases, seem to be unable to oppose the Persian advance. Secondly, we can also note that the prevailing opinion at Emesa, insofar as we can determine it at all, was anti-Persian: certainly this is the flavour of the Thirteenth Sibylline Oracle, and it would appear unlikely that Uranus Antoninus would have had any success in raising a (presumably) local impromptu militia to oppose the victorious Persians without significant popular support. It is evident that the imperial claim of a local Syrian magnate cannot be seen in any meaningful way as evidence of ‘anti-Roman’ sentiment at Emesa during this period. Thirdly, we can once again note the possible involvement of the Emesene priesthood, and thus possibly the old royal family. Here then regional interests appear to be paramount: Uranus Antoninus does not appear to have made any realistic attempts at universal power that we


20 This would seem to be implied in the description of him in the Thirteenth Sibylline Oracle as ‘the priest sent from the sun’ (Sib. Or. XIII. 151), see Potter, Prophecy and History, (n. 1 above) 323-8.
can discern. On the contrary he seems quite desirous of accommodation and power sharing with Valerian.\textsuperscript{21} His coins are dominated by images that were meaningful to eastern and Emesene interests, but virtually meaningless to the broader Roman world.\textsuperscript{22} Evidently, Uranius Antoninus wanted to establish his power in Syria with the objective of defending Emesa and its interests from the Persians, presumably because prior to the arrival of Valerian in the East no one thought the central government willing or capable of doing so.

Macrianus and Quietus (AD 261). The next episode is quite obscure, but seems to have taken place in the aftermath of Valerian's defeat and capture at Edessa by Shapur in AD 261. It appears that a general named Ballista rallied some of the survivors of the disaster, and inflicted a defeat of sorts against the withdrawing Persian column.\textsuperscript{23} After this, the army in the East proclaimed Macrianus and Quietus, the sons of an elderly equestrian also named Macrianus, as co-emperors in rebellion against Valerian's son Gallienus in the west. They appear to have appointed Ballista as prefect whereupon the two Macriani went to oppose Gallienus while Ballista and Quietus remained in the east.\textsuperscript{24}

The two Macriani, however, were defeated by Gallienus' generals in Thrace and killed, at which Ballista and Quietus took refuge in Emesa. Here, they were besieged by the Palmyrene leader Odaenathus, who had also risen to prominence by opposing the Persians in the aftermath of Valerian's defeat and capture. The sources are somewhat contradictory about the events that followed, but it seems that Odaenathus killed Quietus and perhaps also Ballista, although the fate of Ballista is unclear.\textsuperscript{25} In the course of these events we are also told that

\textsuperscript{21} Baldus, 'Uranius Antoninus of Emesa', (n. 19 above) 373.

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 371-4.

\textsuperscript{23} Zonaras XII. 23

\textsuperscript{24} Zonaras XII. 24
many of the citizens of Emesa were killed in the fighting and associated strife, although it does not seem that they perished at the hands of Odaenathus. The *Historia Augusta* states that the killing was done by Ballista, whom it blames also for the death of Quietus.\(^2^6\)

It seems difficult or impossible to discern fully the sequence of events in this usurpation. To be sure, the revolt is more military in character, like those of Macrinus or Philip, rather than regional. The only point of interest is that Emesa was chosen by the Macriani as their base rather than the perhaps more obvious Antioch or the legionary bases at Apamea or RaphanAEA. While we are not given a reason in the sources, it would seem clear at least that Emesa was seen as a secure location yet one important enough to serve as a base of operations. We know nothing of the fortifications of the city in this period, but its success in repelling the Persians in AD 253 perhaps implies that they were strong. In terms of the importance of regionalism in third century Syria, however, it seems that this episode can tell us little.

Emesa in the Palmyrene Revolt (AD 267-73). In the following years, the position of leading city of Roman Syria passed to Palmyra, as Odaenathus defeated Quietus and Ballista and then went on to inflict defeats on the Persians, all ostensibly on behalf of Gallienus. Emesa seems to have been initially supportive of Odaenathus: this, as we have already noted, seems to have been the case in the suppression of Quietus’ revolt. It was at Emesa also that Odaenathus was killed in a palace intrigue in AD 267; ironically his presence in the city possibly indicates that he considered it a safe location.\(^2^7\) In any event there is no indication of Emesene opposition to him: the presence of a regional strongman able to defend Palmyrene (and thus also Emesene) interests, and defeat the Persians yet still remain loyal to Gallienus would probably have suited all the needs of Emesa quite admirably. The Emesene *Thirteenth Sibylline Oracle* is positively laudatory of

\(^2^5\) *SHA Trig. Tyr.* 15, 18

\(^2^6\) *SHA Gallienus* 3

\(^2^7\) *SHA Trig. Tyr.* 15, 17; Zosimus I. 39. 2
Emesa in Roman Syria

Odaenathus in its last 19 lines, added possibly by another author after the earlier completion of the work in the time of Uranius Antoninus; assuming that this reflects the feelings of most of the inhabitants of the city we can regard the Emesene view of Odaenathus as positive.

This position changes dramatically upon the death of Odaenathus and the rise to power of Zenobia and her son Vaballathus. The reason for Palmyra’s break with Rome is most probably the refusal of local civic and imperial authorities to recognize Vaballathus’ inheritance of Odaenathus’ titles and power. No doubt Emesa was among those local authorities who resisted the assumption of these titles by Vaballathus, possibly because they doubted Zenobia’s ability to fill the same role her husband had, or that this assumption of power would or could lead to open revolt from Rome. The main indications we have concerning Emesene attitudes, however, date from the time of Aurelian’s reconquest of Syria: after the Palmyrene defeat at Immae, Zenobia’s advisers counseled her to abandon Emesa due to the strong anti-Palmyrene feelings there.

After the final defeat of Zenobia, Emesa was the place chosen by Aurelian for the trial of Zenobia and her followers, as well as the recipient of generous imperial donations to the Solar Temple; both probably indicative of a strong local sympathy for Aurelian and for the reassertion of Roman central power.

The Causes of Emesene Prominence in the Third Century

In retrospect, then, it can be seen that the city of Emesa was involved in a quite extraordinary series of usurpations and military activity during the third century AD. In at least some of these we note that regional interests may be identified as motivating factors, including and perhaps dominated by a strong anti-Persian (but not necessarily pro-

28 Potter, Prophecy and History (n. 1 above) 150-1.
30 Zosimus I. 54. 1-2
Roman) sentiment. What then were the causes which allowed such prominence, and in what way are they related to the development of regionalist attitudes, both Emesene and Palmyrene, in this period?

The first factor which we can identify is that of Severan patronage. It has been observed that during the reign of Septimius Severus and his successors, the proportion of Senators from Africa and Syria increased significantly. While this is true, it also should not be exaggerated: it remains the case that under the Severans Italy remains the predominant source of new Senators. Nonetheless, there is no doubt that the region of Syria benefited in terms of admissions to the Senate during the Severan period. Some of this could be associated with Severus’ own Punic roots, but no doubt the greater part of them were associations of his Emesene wife, Julia Domna, and her family. This then may certainly account for some of the enrichment of Emesa at this time, and, as has already been noted, perhaps the reluctance of Emesene councilors to let this source of wealth and power go during the time of Macrinus.

Beside the influx of money during the reign of Severus, many of our sources point to other sources of prosperity. These sources, it is clear, were available well before the rise in wealth and influence in Emesa occasioned by the rise of Severus: indeed, that wealth and power may well have made the rise of the Emesene Julian family possible. Millar notes that the penetration of the local gentry at Emesa into the higher echelons of the Roman provincial administration was quite notable well before the rise of the Severan dynasty to prominence, and this can only be evidence of substantial sources of wealth, prestige and power dating from, at the latest, the middle of the second century AD. Indeed, Dio lays great stress on the family connections of Julia Domna, perhaps implying that these were of assistance in the rise of Severus, rather than the other way around.

References:
31 Birley, Septimius Severus, (n. 8 above) 281-2.
32 F. Millar, The Roman Near East (n. 10 above) 119-120.
33 Dio LXVIII. 30
We can identify two major potential sources for the wealth of Emesa. The land around the city scarcely seems capable of providing any significant sources of income, although it is certainly suitable for the pastoral activities of the (originally nomadic) founders of Emesa; the wealth gained from these activities certainly may have been useful in the early stages of Emesa’s rise to prominence.\textsuperscript{34} To account for the kind of money which the later Severans seem to have had on hand to provide donatives and the like, however, we need to look for other sources of wealth besides that which could be gained by pastoral activity in the region of Emesa.

Henri Seyrig noted that there are several significant parallels between the history of Emesa and that of its neighbour Palmyra, to which indeed we have already alluded.\textsuperscript{35} The cities appear as urban entities from nomadic origins at about the same time, they rise to wealth and prominence in the course of the second century AD, and (as this article is intended to discuss) in the third century they are both notably active, both in resisting the Persians and in raising up usurpers to the imperial office. This link is significant in any discussion of the sources of Emesene wealth, because it implies a strong dependence of Emesa on the eastern commerce which seems to have been so important at Palmyra.\textsuperscript{36} Emesa lies on the most direct route from Palmyra to the Levantine ports, where the goods of the eastern commerce would have been loaded on ships bound for the markets of Rome and elsewhere in the Mediterranean world. This would have provided considerable opportunity for the city authorities of Emesa to enrich the city by means

\textsuperscript{34} On the nomadic origins of the Emeseno\textsuperscript{i} see R.D. Sullivan, ‘The Dynasty of Emesa’, (n. 4 above) 198-9.

\textsuperscript{35} H. Seyrig, ‘Caractères de l’histoire d’Émèse’ Syria 36 (1959), 185.

\textsuperscript{36} For the commerce of Palmyra see J.F. Matthews, ‘The Tax Law of Palmyra’ JRS 74 (1984), 157-80; J. Teixidor, Un Port romain du desert: Palmyre et son commerce d’Auguste à Caracalla (Paris 1984); International Colloquium on Palmyra and the Silk Road = AAAS 42 (1996); Young, Rome’s Eastern Trade, (n. 29 above) 136-86.
of customs dues and market tolls, as well as opportunity for the involvement of Emesene merchants in the commerce. Seyrig points out that the depictions on Emesene coins of camel riders support this hypothesis: these he identifies as merchants rather than camel mounted warriors, showing the city’s interest in the eastern trade.\(^{37}\) Both Seyrig and Baldus also note the frequent appearance of the names Julius Aurelius, part of the nomenclature of such persons as Uranius Antoninus as well as Septimius Odeanathus and his son Vaballathus,\(^{38}\) and thus possibly indicating strong links between the two neighbouring cities. All this, then, indicates that there was a very important relationship between Palmyra and Emesa, which was very possibly based on the eastern commerce passing from the Gulf to Palmyra and thence through Emesa to the Levantine coast.

Of course, trade revenues would not have been the only source of Emesene wealth; indeed, Herodian specifically mentions one other source of income, which he clearly implies was of considerable importance. In his account of the usurpation of Elagabalus, he mentions the rich gifts which were given to the temple of the Sun, both by the Emesenes and by local dynasts and notables, even stating that these kings would compete with one another in sending more and more lavish gifts to the temple.\(^{39}\) However, even this source of wealth could be linked to the eastern trade, for much of the wealth from the surrounding territories would not have existed at all if it were not for the revenue generated by this commerce. Even if this is less the case in other cities, we can at least point out Palmyra as a neighbouring city, no doubt one of those that sent dedications, whose prosperity (and thus ability to send costly gifts to the god) were dependent on the eastern trade.


\(^{39}\) Herodian V. 3. 4
These sources of income perhaps also provide us with some insight into the attitude that our sources attribute to the inhabitants of Emesa throughout this period. Except on occasions where an Emesene usurper (such as Elagabalus or Uranius Antoninus) is concerned, the sentiment of the Emesenes seems invariably to be in favour of the Roman central government. For example, the Thirteenth Sibylline Oracle evinces a very anti-Persian sentiment throughout: the Persians are almost always described as 'arrogant' or 'evil' and the writer makes it very clear that, whatever his feelings about the activity (or lack of it) of the central government, he perceives the Persians as inherently inimical to Emesene interests. Indeed, the ability of Uranius Antoninus to rally the local inhabitants of Emesa into a militia and then to take on the Persian army must indicate a high degree of local opposition to the Persians: he could hardly have raised any sort of military force without such support for his ends.

This sentiment, moreover, is not only found against the Persians. It seems clear that the citizens of Emesa were also strongly opposed to the Palmyrene revolt. The sources state that, after Aurelian had defeated the Palmyrene forces at Immae, Zenobia’s advisers counseled her to abandon any attempt to hold Emesa due to the very strong anti-Palmyrene sentiment there. The patronage which Aurelian then gave to the temple and citizens of Emesa, and his use of Emesa as the location for the trial of Zenobia and her advisers, would certainly reflect this sentiment and may indeed have been designed by Aurelian to enhance it. Aurelian is described as bestowing substantial gifts upon the solar temple in Emesa, and attributing his victory over Zenobia to its deity. We certainly cannot rule out genuine religious conviction in these decisions; after all, such visions and resultant dedications would become quite popular in the following century. However, we should also note that such behaviour is not inconsistent with an emperor rewarding subjects who have been loyal to him in a recent revolt.

40 See e.g. Sib. Or. XIII. 13, 37, 100, 110.
41 Zosimus I. 54. 1-2
As we have already noted, however, this general rule seems to be abandoned when specifically Emesene interests are at stake. While we can safely assign the usurpation of Elagabalus to the realm of the dynastic power struggle, it is evident that there was a pronounced regionalist tendency in the imperial pretensions of Lotapianus and Uranius Antoninus. In both these cases, however, we can assign the reasons for a local imperial elevation to a despair with the inability of the central government to act in Emesa’s best interests. What is interesting, of course, is the fact that this principle only seems to apply when the usurper is actually an Emesene: Zenobia asserted herself against the central government at a time when that government was clearly unable to protect the east since the death of Odaenathus, but, as we have already seen, the Emesenes did not support her, at least not after there was a genuine Roman emperor on the scene in the person of Aurelian. Despite the symbiotic relationship of the two cities, there many therefore have been a certain amount of rivalry between Palmyra and Emesa which made the Emesenes reluctant to support a Palmyrene usurper, whereas they had been willing to support a Palmyrene acting on behalf of the central government (i.e. Odaenathus).

Clearly then Emesa for the most part saw its interests as aligned with those of Rome, and only departed from that principle when it was perceived that the central government would not or could not act in the interest of Syria in general or of Emesa in particular. This then brings us to the question: what were the factors that caused Emesa to consider that its interests lay with Rome even when the Persians would have appeared to have greater military power than Rome, or even when a neighbouring city such as Palmyra was in revolt against Rome?

The primary reason would appear to be that of the commercial interests of the city, specifically those associated with the eastern commerce. When there was war with Persia or rebellion against Rome, the trade which passed from Palmyra through Emesa to the ports of the Levant must inevitably have ground to a halt. Indeed, the series of inscriptions at Palmyra which commemorate these trade caravans indicates just this: at times when there was war with the Parthians and Persians, the inscriptions (and therefore presumably the caravans they
Accordingly, the invasions of the Persians would have been seen as an interruption of the city’s prosperity – when the Persians invade, the caravans stop, and the taxes and dues remitted to Emesa’s authorities as well as the prosperity which may well have been gleaned from the commerce by the city’s merchants ends. This then accounts for the violently anti-Persian sentiment we find in the Thirteenth Sibylline Oracle. It also accounts for the apparent Emesene antipathy toward the imperial pretensions of Zenobia, for her rebellion against Rome must also have ended, at least for a time, the passage of the caravans to the ports of the Levant for shipment throughout the Empire. While there still would presumably have been some market for Palmyra’s trade goods within the region ruled by Palmyra, there is no doubt that Zenobia’s rebellion would have cut off a substantial portion of the revenue which accrued to Emesa from the eastern trade.

The reason that Emesa was able to play the role it did in the third century thus seems to have been closely related to the eastern trade. Firstly, the revenues derived from that trade, as well as the wealth derived from temple remissions, made it possible for Emesa, and especially for the members of Emesa’s leading families, to raise armies and resist the Persians. Secondly, the wealth provided them with a considerable incentive to do so: for when the Persians invaded the trade ceased, and the sources of Emesene wealth were dramatically affected. This interest also accounts for the Emesene antipathy toward the Palmyrene revolt, for it too would have been seen as an interruption to the commerce and a consequent threat to the position and wealth of Emesa and its leading families. Only when the central government seemed utterly incapable of protecting Emesa’s interests, or when it was perceived as acting contrary to those interests, did this general rule change: in those instances a local dynast such as Iotapianus, Uranius Antoninus or (perhaps) Julius Alexander could arise and challenge the rule of the incumbent emperor with some chance of popular support.

Despite the Emesene opposition to Palmyra’s rebellion against the central Roman authorities, in many ways the actions of Emesa

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42 For these inscriptions see M. Gawlikowski, ‘Palmyra as a Trading Centre’ *Iraq* 56 (1994), 27-33.
throughout the third century must have provided precedent and inspiration for that revolt. When Zenobia decided, for whatever reason, to attack the forces loyal to the Roman emperor in the east, the examples of such people as Uranius Antoninus cannot have been far from her mind. Palmyra had the same source of wealth as did Emesa, that of the eastern commerce, and it had many of the same interests. These are the sources of wealth and the interests which provided both the capability and the incentive to Emesa and then to Palmyra to be centres of resistance to Shapur and, when necessary, alternative centres of imperial authority. The other cities of the Roman east such as Antioch, although they were much larger and more prosperous than either Emesa or Palmyra, nonetheless lacked the incentives that those cities had to play such a prominent political role during the crisis of the Roman East in the third century AD.

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