

# Palmyra and the Red Sea: *La Venise des sables* Thirty Years Later

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Nel corso degli ultimi trent'anni, nuove scoperte hanno profondamente modificato la nostra conoscenza del commercio romano nel Mar Rosso. Il presente contributo si concentra sulle novità apportate dalle nuove scoperte, che consentono di tracciare un quadro più ampio e articolato di tale commercio. Qui viene proposta una nuova ipotesi: poiché nel III secolo EC le attività commerciali di Palmira furono messe in pericolo dalle crescenti ostilità tra Roma e i Sasanidi lungo l'Eufrate, le rotte commerciali furono deviate verso il Mar Rosso, Berenice e da lì verso Coptos e Alessandria. In questo contesto, l'occupazione dell'Egitto da parte di Zenobia e Vaballath non sembra più un'azione bizzarra e sconsiderata, ma corrisponde piuttosto a una chiara strategia economica.

Thirty years have gone by since Ernest Will published his work, which in his intention was not destined only to a limited group of specialists, but it was aimed at meeting the interest of a wider public: *Les Palmyréniens*, this was its title, to which the author added a much suggestive and successful subtitle: *la Venise des sables*.<sup>1</sup> Will explained the reasons that had led him to this apparently strange juxtaposition between Palmyra and the luckiest of the Maritime Republics. The elements that allowed this comparison between the Desert Queen and the Queen of the Mediterranean were the history of that commercial hub operating between the Roman East and Asia, its political organisation funded on a trade aristocracy wide enough as to allow for it the definition of *république de marchands*, so much so that Jean Baptiste Yon was able to depict a detailed picture of that *notabilat palmyrénien* (Yon 2002).

To be honest, the comparison between Palmyra and Venice was also allowed by the existence of internal elements. Scholars were aware of a frieze from one of the tower graves that are typical for the necropolises around the caravan city of Palmyra, the sepulcher of the Marona family located in the necropolis to the south-west of the city. That frieze that was long displayed at the Museum of Palmyra, showed a ship with a square sail.<sup>2</sup> Next to the ship in a very damaged part of the frieze there stood a character dressed in a Palmyrenean fashion, and the paws of a camel are still visible. Apparently, this is a quite mismatched representation in a desert city that is hundreds of kilometres far from the next river and thousands from the sea. However, the links between the desert hubs and the harbours on the sea are well attested in the ancient

<sup>1</sup> Will 1992. Gawlikowski 1994a wrote a very important review to this work, which reaches far beyond the limits of a simple review.

<sup>2</sup> The most recent filing of this find I know about: Raja 2020: 139 no. 5 with literature.