

ALEKSANDRA KRZYŻANOWSKA

COINS OF “ZENOBIA” IN PALMYRA

Certainly it is nothing new to say that mistakes, incorrect specification of a relic that might have come about in the past result in unexpected consequences.

Assuming that such problems should not only be borne in mind, but corrected as well, I have taken the decision to present one of such errors. My goal is also to warn archaeologists in particular not to recklessly specify relics found during site research, coins in this case, and especially publish them in a scientific study. The latter consolidates the error, thus providing grounds for erroneous inference.

The case described herein pertains to the history of the ancient city of Palmyra, located in the middle of the Syrian desert. Flourishing from a junction for caravans across the desert in the first centuries after Christ, at the turn of the 1st century in particular, it developed into a prosperous trading centre, adorned by a large number of beautiful buildings, temples, streets surrounded by colonnades. However, Palmyra's finest periods are that of the reign of emperors Valerian and Gallienus around the middle of the 3rd century. The city grew in power alongside the falling splendour of the Roman Empire. During wars with the Persian invaders, when emperor Valerian himself was taken prisoner and the Roman army defeated, Odeinatus, the ruler of Palmyra at that time succeeds in standing up to the enemy's invasion from beyond the Euphrates. On defeating the Persians in 261 the Roman Senate bestows upon him the title of the “Restitutor Orientis”. Yet, as early as 267 he was murdered by one of his relatives, the throne then been taken over by his wife Zenobia ruling on behalf of his juvenile sons. Due to her extraordinary talents and unrestrained ambition she managed to raise enough force and — taking the most of the fall of imperial power — threaten Rome. Waging a victorious war she managed to conquer the Asiatic territories and the whole of Egypt. Liked by her subjects she passed to history as one of the most famous women of Antiquity, sharing fame with Cleopatra VII of Egypt. Her end was equally tragic. Defeated by the newly elected emperor Aurelian, in 273 she was taken prisoner, then put to death. Palmyra was ruined, its people having been exterminated by the victorious Roman army. The queen became the main figure of many a legend or story, up till now for the people of Palmyra she is a kind of a national heroine. No wonder her images or portraits are being looked for.



Fig. 1. Roman coin with the portrait of Salonina, wife of Gallienus

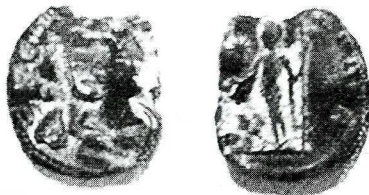


Fig. 2. Coin found in Palmyra in 1960 described as “metal tessera with the portrait of Zenobia”

Having visited Palmyra several times since the 1970s, I noticed that the image of empress Salonina (Fig. 1) to be seen upon the coins of Gallienus, her husband, is regarded as a portrait of Zenobia. Searching for the cause of that I discovered that an incorrect specification of the relic must have provided grounds for the phenomenon. In 1960 during Polish excavation works in Palmyra a specimen was found, classified as a “metal tessera of queen Zenobia” with her likeness on it (Fig. 2). Published with an accompanying photograph it presents an antoninianus from the time of Gallienus with a portrait and damaged legend of empress Salonina upon the obverse¹. Note that at that time the coins that had been found there were presented to numismatists in the form of photographs. The relic, referred to as tessera, had not been examined by a coin specialist before it was published. Beyond any doubt the fact that “Zenobia’s portrait” was revealed in a scientific publication provided a reason to display the object (a coin of Salonina!) in the show-case of the local museum as a portrait of the famous queen. In this place it is also worth mentioning that — to my knowledge — no metal tesserae are known from the Palmyra neighbourhood. Those little objects, characteristic of the city, were presumably used as a sort of “tickets” to feasts of worship to local deities, they were impressed in clay and then fired. Thus such an erroneously specified object differs from the other known tesserae not merely in respect of metal, but technique as well, let alone the style characteristic of Roman coins from the middle of the 3rd century. Note that my remarks on the error and requests to change the caption in the show-case have never been approved of, as the scientific publication had more authority. Unfortunately the mistake brought about more serious consequences, therefore displaying the possible scale of such errors. Already in 1995 Janusz

¹ Kazimierz Michałowski, *Palmyra. Fouilles Polonaises 1960*, Warszawa 1962, p. 217, no. 118, fig. 251.

Byliński in his article², among the coins found in an excavated building, writes of “Zenobia’s coin struck in 272” (sic!) with a photograph of an antoninianus bearing the image of Salonina. He reads out the beginning of the damaged legend as: “SZ(Enobia)AVG” (Fig. 3). The beginning of this somewhat worn inscription was read as S ZENOBIA AVG, even though a correct reading gives SALONINA AVG. Perhaps the author had come across the article of R. A. G. Carson on the subject of the extreme rarity of antoniniani of Zenobia (with only six examples known to its author mainly from the literature and illustrations)³. On the basis of an analysis of these coins, only two of them from direct observation, Carson is willing to accept them as authentic products of the Antioch mint of the time of the rule of that queen. The arguments advanced by Carson however do not seem very convincing to me, but even a summary comparison of the coins he published with the items discussed here by me demonstrate basic differences, both in the technique of the manufacture of the die as well as the portrait of the ruler; besides which the latter coins demonstrate more obviously the characteristics of coins of Salonina. The author of the publication of the third century building in Palmyra does not however cite Carson, probably therefore he based his reasoning only on the opinion prevailing in Palmyra, rendering a false interpretation, once again in a serious scientific publication.



Fig. 3. Coin of Salonina found in a 3rd century open-court building in Palmyra, described as a “coin of Zenobia”

A beautiful photograph of the coin of Salonina found during Polish excavations is to be seen on a series of postcards presenting the most famous relics of the Palmyra museum, needless to say — specified as a portrait of Zenobia. At the end I must mention that in 2001 I asked about the find to include it in the currently created list of coins discovered by our mission in Palmyra, just about to be published; I was told the coin had gone to Canada to a large exhibition of Palmyra relics, as a “coin of Zenobia” of course.

Numismatists specialising in the period have long known that coins with the portrait of Zenobia were struck in the mint at Alexandria in Egypt. They differ considerably (above all in the Greek hairstyle and the inscription in Greek) from not only the coins found at Palmyra, but also the antoniniani published by Carson. The bronze small coinage produced in Palmyra itself for use in internal trade differed

² *A IIIrd century open-court building in Palmyra. Excavations Report*, *Damaszener Mitteilungen* 1995, p. 246, plate 33 d.

³ R. A. G. Carson, *Antoniniani of Zenobia*, *Numismatica e Antichità Classiche*, VII, 1978, s. 221–228.



Fig. 4. Drawing of a coin of Zenobia, minted in Alexandria in Egypt

completely in appearance from both of these. They bear quite different images, but not depictions of rulers. Carson therefore suggested that antoniniani in Roman style could therefore have been struck only in the imperial mint in Antioch. This supposition remains unproven. In 1978 at the end of his article, Carson expressed the hope that the authenticity of the antoniniani of Zenobia discussed by him would be confirmed by the discovery of more of these coins in hoards or excavations. Unfortunately in the 25 years since then, despite regular excavations at Antioch itself, at Palmyra and other towns of Syria, no examples of coins of Zenobia with clear inscriptions have so far been found. I am therefore led to suspect that the six examples of coins discussed by Carson should not be regarded as authentic.

I do not have to add that the image of Zenobia, a woman so significant for the city, for the people of Palmyra became a considerable “carrier” of propaganda. The typical iconography of the portrait of empress Salonina: coiffure, resembling a helmet, ears uncovered, tress from the back of the head to the forehead, imperial diadem over the forehead — provided a pattern for local souvenir-makers: numerous images of the famous queen upon ceramics, T-shirts and other gadgets meant for a large number of tourists.

At the end a tiny personal remark. Since my interest in Palmyra coins, as well as those that have been found there, is known from many a publication, I would not like the persistently repeated error to be attributed to me.

Translated by Robert Skarzyński and Paul Barford

ALEKSANDRA KRZYŻANOWSKA

MONETY „ZENOBII” W PALMYRZE

(Streszczenie)

Pomyłki w określaniu zabytków odkopanych przez archeologów, a często dotyczy to monet, nie poprawiane we właściwym czasie zakorzeniają się w świadomości i trudno je potem wyplenić. Do takiej sytuacji doszło w syryjskiej Palmyrze, miejscowości o starożytnym, szlachetnym rodowodzie. W historii miasta na początku naszej ery wielką rolę odegrała królowa Zenobia, z której osobą łączy się bunt palmyreńczyków przeciwko panowaniu rzymskiemu, krwawo stłumiony w 273 r. n.e. przez cesarza Aureliana. Sławie tej niezwyklej kobiety należy przypisać fakt, że niewłaściwe określenie monety cesarzowej Saloniny, żony Galliena (258–263) opublikowane w 1960 r. jako „tesery z wizerunkiem Zenobii”, utrwaliło się w świadomości nie tylko miejscowej ludności, ale i archeologów. Uparcie zaczęto odtąd monety Saloniny nazywać monetami Zenobii, a ikonografia portretu tej cesarzowej weszła do pamiętkarstwa jako wzór wizerunku sławnej królowej.

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