



## Summary :

King of Palmyra in Syria. He contributed to the rebuttal of the Persian invasion into Asia Minor after the arrest of Valerian (260 AD). He defeated and possibly killed the usurper Quietus and his supporter Ballista in 261 AD. He was killed in Emesa of Syria or in Cappadocia in 267 AD.

## Date and Place of Birth

Beginning of the 3rd century AD – Palmyra

## Date and Place of Death

267 AD – Emesa, Syria or Cappadocia

## Main Role

King of Palmyra

## 1. Family – Activities

Septimius Odaenathus<sup>1</sup> was the descendant of an old and important family of Palmyra, where he was possibly born at the beginning of the 3rd century AD.<sup>2</sup> He was the son of Hairan, grandson of Vaballathus and great grandson of Nator. Odaenathus had two sons, one by his first wife, Septimius Hairan and one by his second wife, Zenobia, Vaballathus.<sup>3</sup> The addition of the name Septimius shows that he gained the status of a Roman citizen during the Severan dynasty (193-217 AD), when Palmyra came under the regime of colonia (Roman colony).

He held power in Palmyra with certainty from 251/252 AD when he is reported as the town's "exarch". He also bore the titles of the "brightest **senator** or **consular**", which were not necessarily connected to his administrative powers or his military career, but could be honorary titles in recognition of his rule by Rome. After the arrest of Emperor [Valerian](#) by Sapor I and the proclamation as emperors of the East of [Macrianus II and Quietus](#), sons of the insurgent Macrianus I, he remained loyal to emperor [Gallienus](#) and overpowered Quietus and the usurper [Ballista](#) in Emesa in Syria in 261 AD.<sup>4</sup> The title "king of kings" found on inscriptions in Palmyra, was possibly due to his successes against the Persians over the following years while the title "dux Romanorum et corrector totius orientis" (ruler of the Romans and commissioner of all the East) for his protection of Roman interests in the area.

He was assassinated between 29 August 267 and 28 August 268 AD in Emesa in Syria or in [Cappadocia](#) along with the son he had had by his first wife. Some scholars state that he was killed by a cousin named Maeonius, who had conspired with Zenobia, as she wanted her sons to rise to the throne. Another source mentions that he was killed by a nephew with whom he had argued during a hunt. Others report the emperor Gallienus as the instigator of the conspiracy because he had begun to worry about Odaenathus' increasing power, while yet another view has the emperor himself killing him in the battlefield. The list of suspects ends with Cocceius Rufinus, commander of Arabia, who just before dying revealed to the emperor Gallienus that he had killed Odaenathus because he was preparing to defect or that just before his death he told the emperor [Aurelianus](#) that he had planned the conspiracy in order to incriminate Zenobia.<sup>5</sup> It has also been recorded that Odaenathus was murdered in Cappadocia while leading his soldiers to [Heraclea Pontica](#) against the [Goth](#) invaders.

After his death, the kingdom of Palmyra came into the hands of his wife Zenobia and their son, Vaballathus.<sup>6</sup>

## 2. Judgement – Assessment

The attitude of ancient authors is overtly positive toward Odaenathus, on the one hand because he managed to restrain the Persians and save the honour of the Roman Empire at a moment when after the arrest and humiliation of the emperor Valerian the empire's eastern border was unprotected, and on the other hand because he remained faithful to the legitimate emperor Gallienus and fought





against the insurgents Macrianus I and his sons. Some Greek authors, such as the historian Nikostratus from Trebizond, frequented the court of Palmyra; his history which survives in fragments, records Odaenethus' successes against the Persians in contrast to the failures of the Roman emperors.<sup>7</sup> The varying views expressed about his assassinator are due to the attempt by some Roman authors to implicate Zenobia who later opposed Roman legitimacy and acquit the Roman authorities and the equivalent attempt by Greek authors to achieve the opposite. Moreover, all sources are largely later, i.e. come from a period during which Odaenethus, Zenobia and Vaballathus had begun to pass or had already passed from the sphere of historical truth to the sphere of legend where everything is permissible. Characteristic of this is the 13th **Sibylline Oracle**, where Odaenethus is represented as a flame throwing lion about to devour the deer with the beautiful horns (Macrianus I), the blue venomous reptile (Sapor) and the billy-goat with the arched legs (Ballista).<sup>8</sup> The attitude of modern researchers does not deviate from the presentation and analysis of the events with the exemption of R. Stoneman, who presents a somewhat idealized image of Palmyra, its history and protagonists.

What can be said with certainty about Odaenethus is that he contributed to the stability of the eastern section of the Roman Empire at a time when nothing seemed stable. He contributed not only to the removal of the Persian threat from the area of Asia Minor but also to the preservation of the imperial legitimacy.

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1. In the literature he is also referred to as Odenathus. In this case the form used in the inscriptions in Palmyra has been chosen.
  2. The year 220 AD is suggested as his birth date by Stoneman, R., *Palmyra and its Empire. Zenobia's Revolt against Rome* (Ann Arbor 1992), p. 77 and Gawlikowski, M., "Les princes de Palmyre", *Syria* 62 (1985), p. 261, cannot be correct, as in 251 AD his son is referred to as "senator" and "patron".
  3. These are the only children whose existence is confirmed in literary and epigraphical sources, while Vaballathus' also by coins. Herod, son of Odaenethus by his first wife, Timolaos and Herrannianus by Zenobia, Odaenethus the younger, Herodianus and Eusebios are also mentioned. Here we follow the views of Equini Schneider, E., *Septimia Zenobia Sebaste* (Studia Archaeologica 61, 1993) (Rome 1993), p. 11-23, 53-60 are followed.
  4. About Odaenethus as an agent of the Romans in the area, see Olmstead, A.T., "The Mid-Third Century of Christian Era", *CPh* 37 (1942), p. 419-420.
  5. SHA, *Gal.* 13.1; SHA *Tyr. Trig.* 15.5.6, 17.1.3; Zonar. 12.24; Zosim. 1.39.2; John. Antioch, excerpt 1522; Malal. 12.298. Anonymous holdover of the Roman history of Dion, *FHG* 4, 195. Equini Schneider, E., *Septimia Zenobia Sebaste* (Studia Archaeologica 61), (Rome 1993), p. 11, n. 2.
  6. Syngelos 716-717. This version is preferred by Potter, D.S., *Prophecy and History in the Crisis of the Roman Empire. A Historical Commentary on the Thirteenth Sibylline Oracle* (Oxford 1990), p. 55, n. 161. However, the fact that the assassinator is presented as an anonymous individual with the same name as the victim (Odaenethus) in other sources, creates numerous doubts about the validity of this account.
  7. *FGrHist.* 98. Potter, D.S., *Prophecy and History in the Crisis of the Roman Empire. A Historical Commentary on the Thirteenth Sibylline Oracle* (Oxford 1990), p. 71-72. It has also been supported that the speech Odaenethus by the philosopher Livanus (Livan., *Epist.* 998) is the creation of the orator, philologist and neo-platonic philosopher Cassius Longinus, *RE* XIII2 (1927), col. 1402, see entry "Longinos" (Aulitzky, K.). The court of Odaenethus was also frequented by the sophists Kallinikos and Genathlios from Petra, Bowersock, G.W., *Roman Arabia* (Cambridge 1983), p. 135.
  8. Potter, D.S., *Prophecy and History in the Crisis of the Roman Empire. A Historical Commentary on the Thirteenth Sibylline Oracle* (Oxford 1990), p. 176 (165-170) and p. 341-343.

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## Glossary :

	<b>consul, -lis</b>
An official of the Roman state. In the period of the Republic, it was the highest military and political office; two consuls were elected each year. The consular office survived into the Imperial period (and further into the early Byzantine period), becoming a honorary post.	
	<b>senator, the (1. Roman, 2. Byzantine)</b>
1. A Roman body of men that originally advised the king and then the consuls; Heredity was not the only means of joining the senate and "new men" or <i>novi homines</i> could become part of it; Augustus revised the senate and left the body with less power and bolstered hereditary claims as a means to enter the senate; it continued to make laws and conferred powers on new emperors. 2. Member of the senate. The senate, a roman institution transferred from Rome to Constantinople by Constantine I during the Byzantine period was an advisory body whose rights and responsibilities were not clearly defined. It was consisted of imperial officers coming from the upper and were ranked according to hierarchical levels: <i>virii illustri</i> (perfectus praetoriae and the magister), <i>virii spectabili</i> (proconsul, vicarius and the comes), <i>virii clarissimi</i> (consul praetoriae) and <i>virii perfectissimi</i> (praeses and duces). Since the 6th c. AD a new title was established for the upper officers ( <i>virii gloriosi</i> ). The years that followed officials were entitled to officers regardless their position as senators or if they were about to be admitted to this body.	
	<b>Sibyllian oracles, the</b>
Body of texts of prophetic character written between the 2nd and 5th centuries BC in the greek language and in hexameter. They are probably of Jewish origin.	